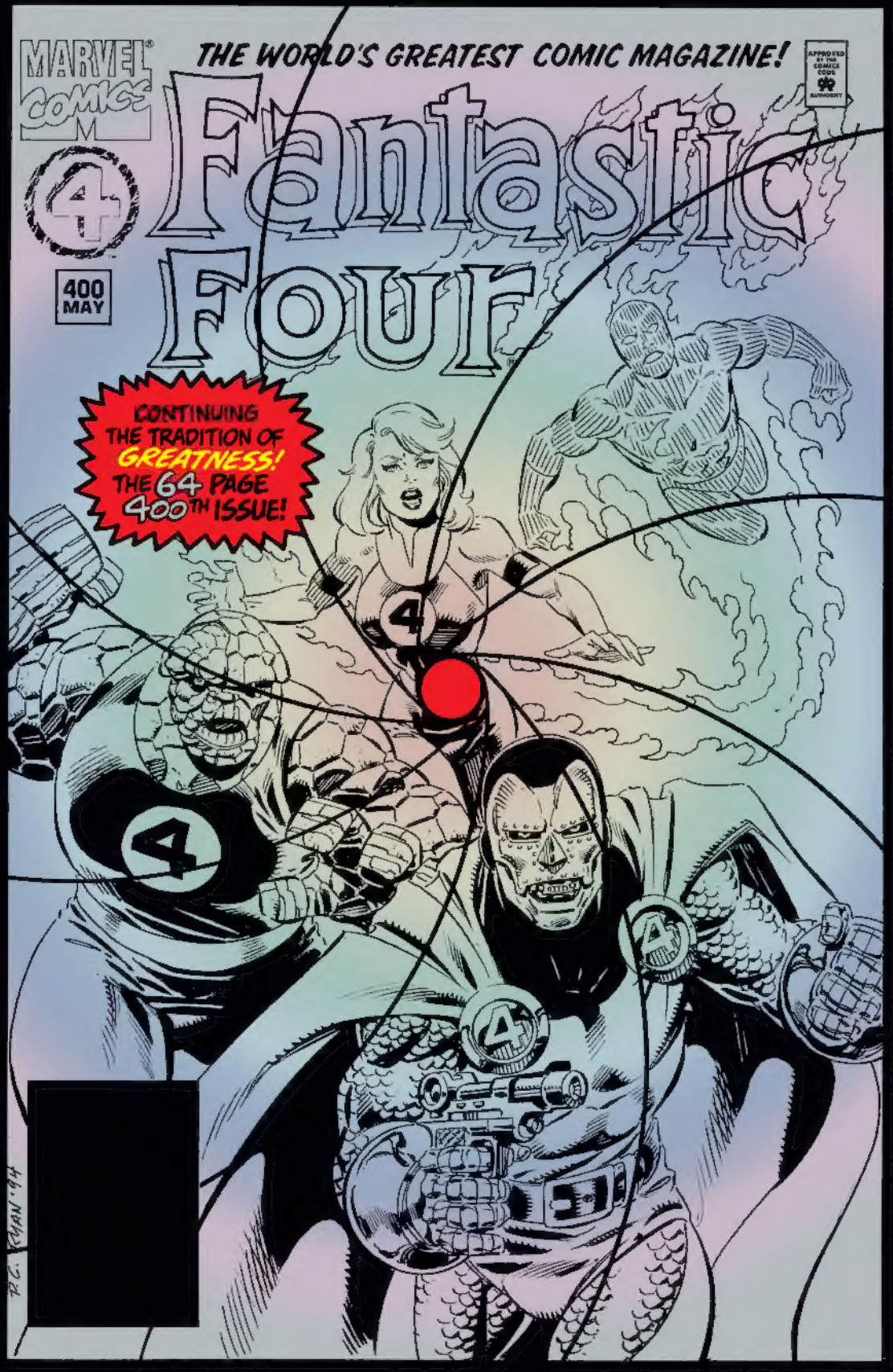
MARVEL COMICS
THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE!
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
Fantastic Four
400
MAY
CONTINUING THE TRADITION OF GREATNESS! THE 64 PAGE 400TH ISSUE!
P.C. KAHAN '94

FANTASTIC FOUR 400

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INTRODUCTION BY STAN LEE ..... PAGE 2
"EVEN THE WATCHERS CAN DIE!" ..... PAGE 3
"DEFENDING A TITLE" A TEXT BY MICHAEL MARTS ..... PAGE 53
"IN MEMORIAM!" ..... PAGE 56
LETTERS PAGE ..... PAGE 62

SPECIAL THANKS TO RALPH MACCHIO, MIKE ROCKWITZ AND THE SPIRIT OF THE GREAT GLABOO.

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INTRODUCTION

We've all had days when nothing seemed to go right. But there was once a day when it seemed nothing could go wrong. It was the day Jack Kirby and I created the FANTASTIC FOUR.

Even as I described the characters to Jack, I could almost see the wheels spinning in his brain. We were so in sync that I'm convinced he had mentally drawn our colorful quartet before I finished talking. We both felt the concept was perfect. Our characters would be real people (albeit superpowered), with real emotions, living in a real city (New York) and beset by real problems—while battling the weirdest foes of all.

But, we didn't realize that the creation of the FF was a watershed moment, launching the start of the entire Marvel Universe, a universe that was forever destined to change the public's perception of comic-book super heroes.

Nor did we dream that many of our additional characters would achieve a permanent place in fictional mythology; characters such as Dr. Doom, Galactus, the Silver Surfer, the Skrull, and the incredible Inhumans, to name just a few.

And, talk about precedents! We've shattered dozens since launching "The World's Greatest Comicbook." We were the first to introduce guest appearances on a regular basis. (People still talk of the time Spider-Man tried to join the team—until he learned they paid no salary.) We were also first to regularly feature our version of TV miniseries, such as the award-winning "Galactus Trilogy", which appeared in issues #48-50. And certainly no group of super heroes had ever before rebelled, argued and fought amongst themselves until the FF led the way.

But, on a personal basis, I'm most impressed with the awesome array of talent who've contributed so much to the fame of our far-out foursome. Imagine having names such as these connected to your strip—Kirby, Ayers, Sinnott, Simonson, Byrne, Thomas, Frenz, Ryan, DeFalco, plus others too numerous to mention.

Yes, the Fantastic Four has earned its place in comicbook immortality, but, considering its proud history, how could it be otherwise?

Excelsior!

Stan Lee
February 1995

AS ONE OF THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS QUARTET, SUSAN RICHARDS HAS TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY THROUGHOUT THE KNOWN UNIVERSE...
SHE HAS JOURNEYED ACROSS TIME--
--AND HAS EXPLORED BOTH THE OCEAN'S DEPTHS AND THE UNCHARTED REGIONS OF SUB-SPACE!
SHE HAS EXPERIENCED THE HORRORS OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE--
--AND HAS FACED DEADLY CHALLENGES IN BOTH A MICRO-WORLD AND AN INNIVERSE!
AND YET, FOR ALL THE UNCANNY MENACES SHE HAS EVER ENCOUNTERED, FOR ALL THE BIZARRE SIGHTS SHE'S WITNESSED...
NONE CAN POSSIBLY COMPARE IN SCOPE OR GRANDEUR WITH THE STARTLING SPECTACLE WHICH NOW CONFRONTS HER!

ONLY MINUTES AGO, THE INVISIBLE WOMAN AND HER TEN COMPANIONS WERE INSTANTANEOUSLY TRANSPORTED TO AN UNNAMED GALAXY--

--WHERE A VAST ARMY OF WATCHERS WAS FACING OFF AGAINST AN EQUALLY EXTENSIVE ARMADA OF ARMOR-CLAD CELESTIALS!*

AND THEN, EVEN BEFORE OUR HEROES COULD FULLY ASSESS THE SITUATION, A BEAM OF CELESTIAL ENERGY SWEPT OVER THE MOST GARGANTUAN WATCHER OF ALL--

--FORCING HIM TO APPARENTLY LOSE CONSCIOUSNESS AND COLLAPSE UPON THE WOODED PLANET BELOW!

LOOKIT ALL THE BLASTED WATCHERS! THERE MUST BE HUNDREDS, MAYBE EVEN THOUSANDS OF 'EM!

TALK ABOUT A PRIME LOCATION FOR THE HAIR CLUB FOR MEN!

FUNNY, BEN. REALLY FUNNY. WE'RE LUCKY WE ALL MANAGED TO ARRIVE IN ONE PIECE! IT'S OBVIOUS WE STUMBLED INTO A MAJOR CONFLICT!

THE SMALLEST CELESTIAL MUST BE AT LEAST TWO THOUSAND FEET TALL--AND I WON'T EVEN TRY TO GUESS THE HEIGHT OF THAT BIG JOKER FLOATING ABOVE US!

STAN LEE PROUDLY PRESENTS AN ACTION-PACKED SAGA WHICH WILL FOREVER ALTER THE COURSE OF THE MARVEL HISTORY!

TOM DEFALCO & PAUL RYAN SCRIPTED, PLOTTED & PENCILED IT!

DAN BULANADI INKED IT!

JIM NOVAK LETTERED IT! JOHN KALISZ COLORED IT!

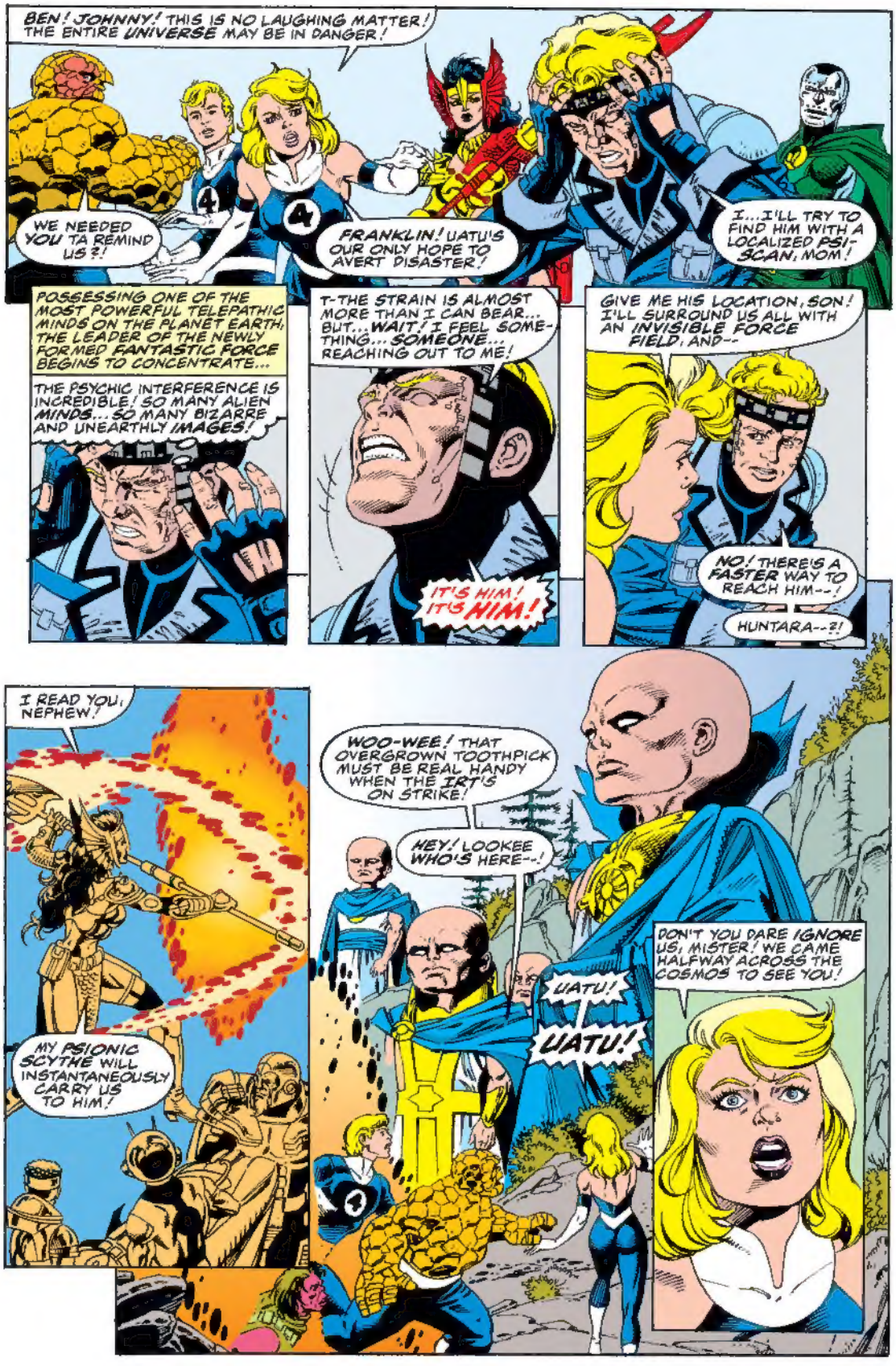
NEL YOMTOV EDITED IT!

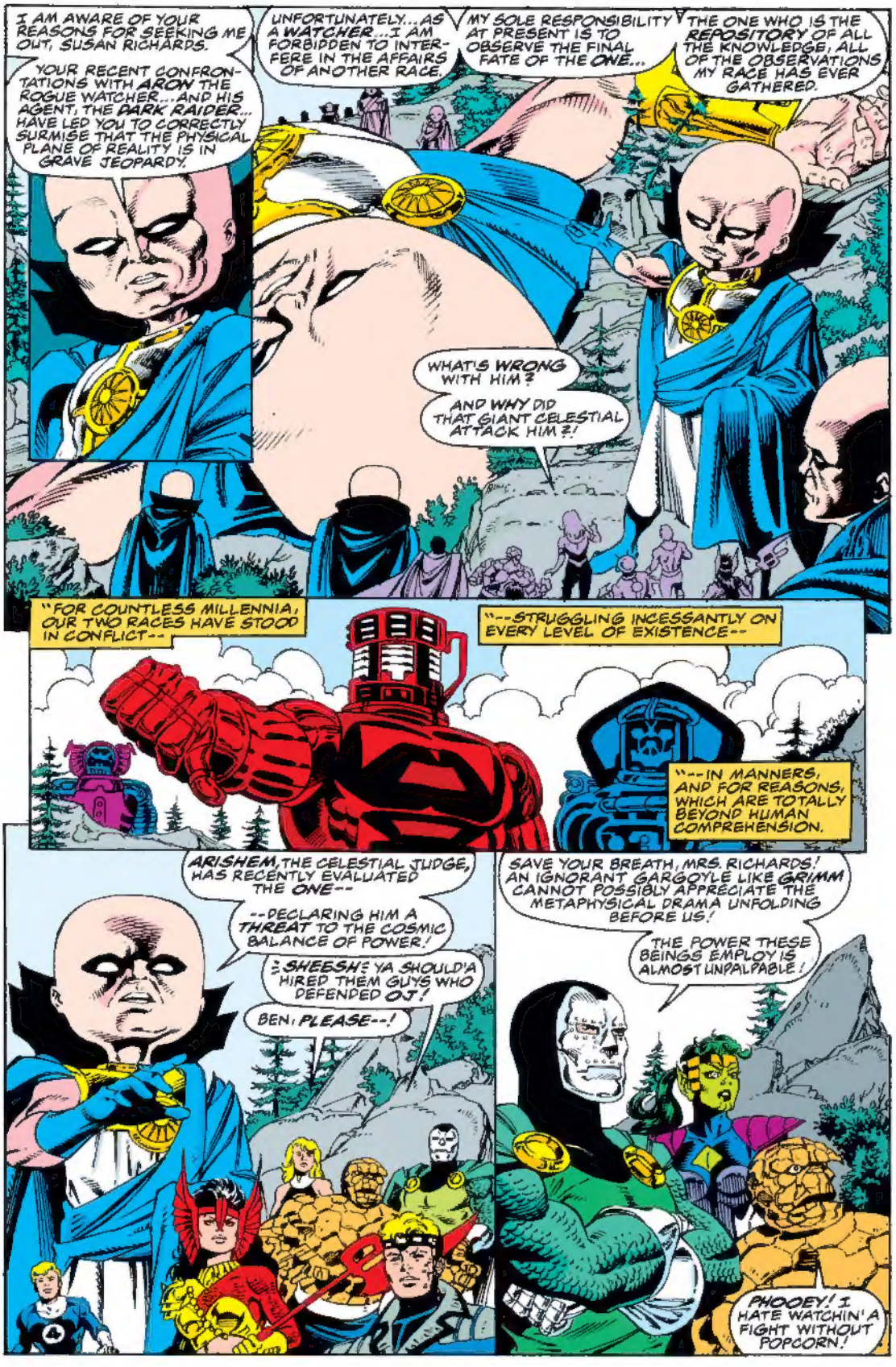
MARK GRUENWALD TRIED TO UNDERSTAND IT!

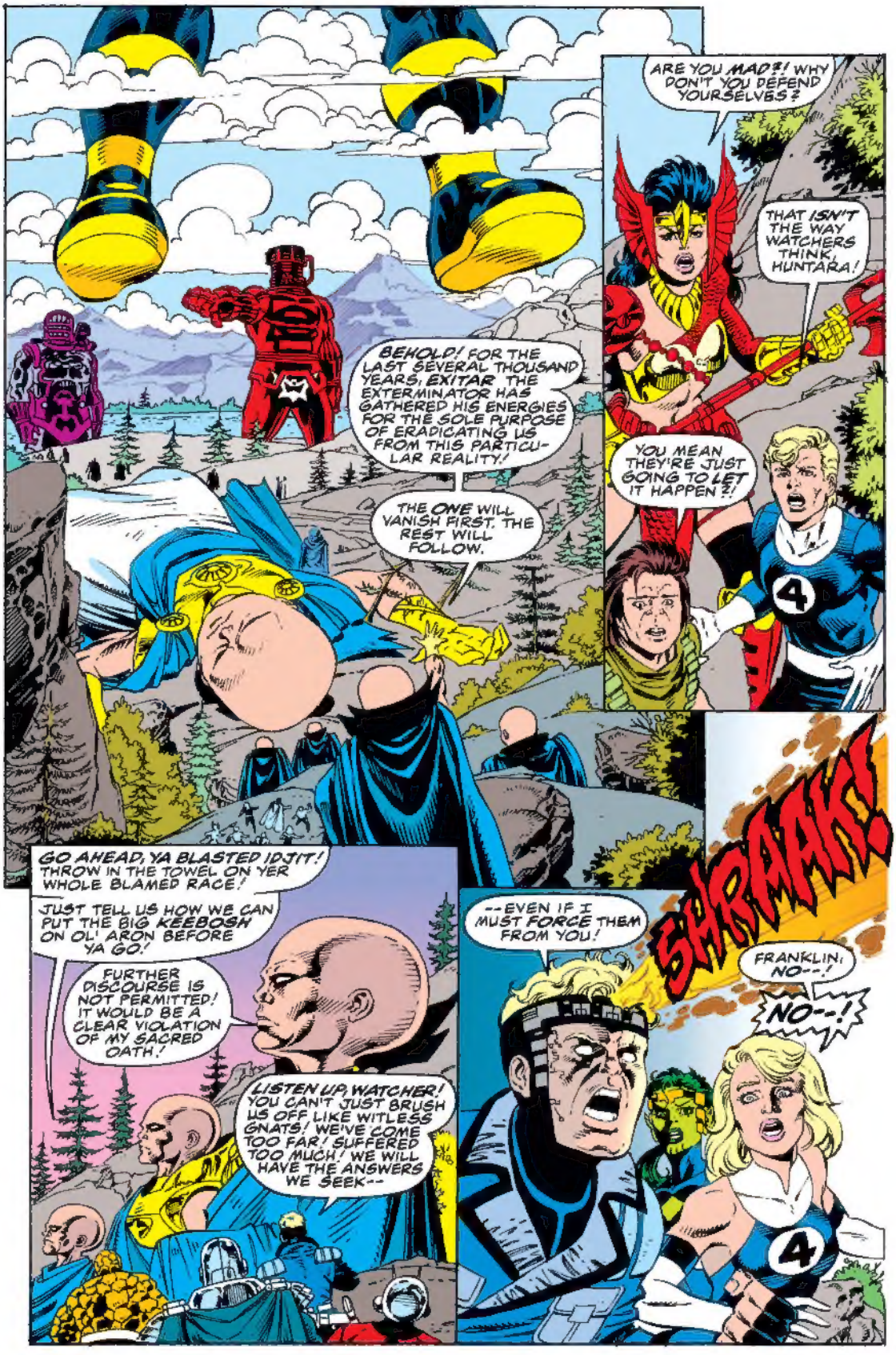
*SEE FANTASTIC FORCE #7 FOR DETAILS. --NEL

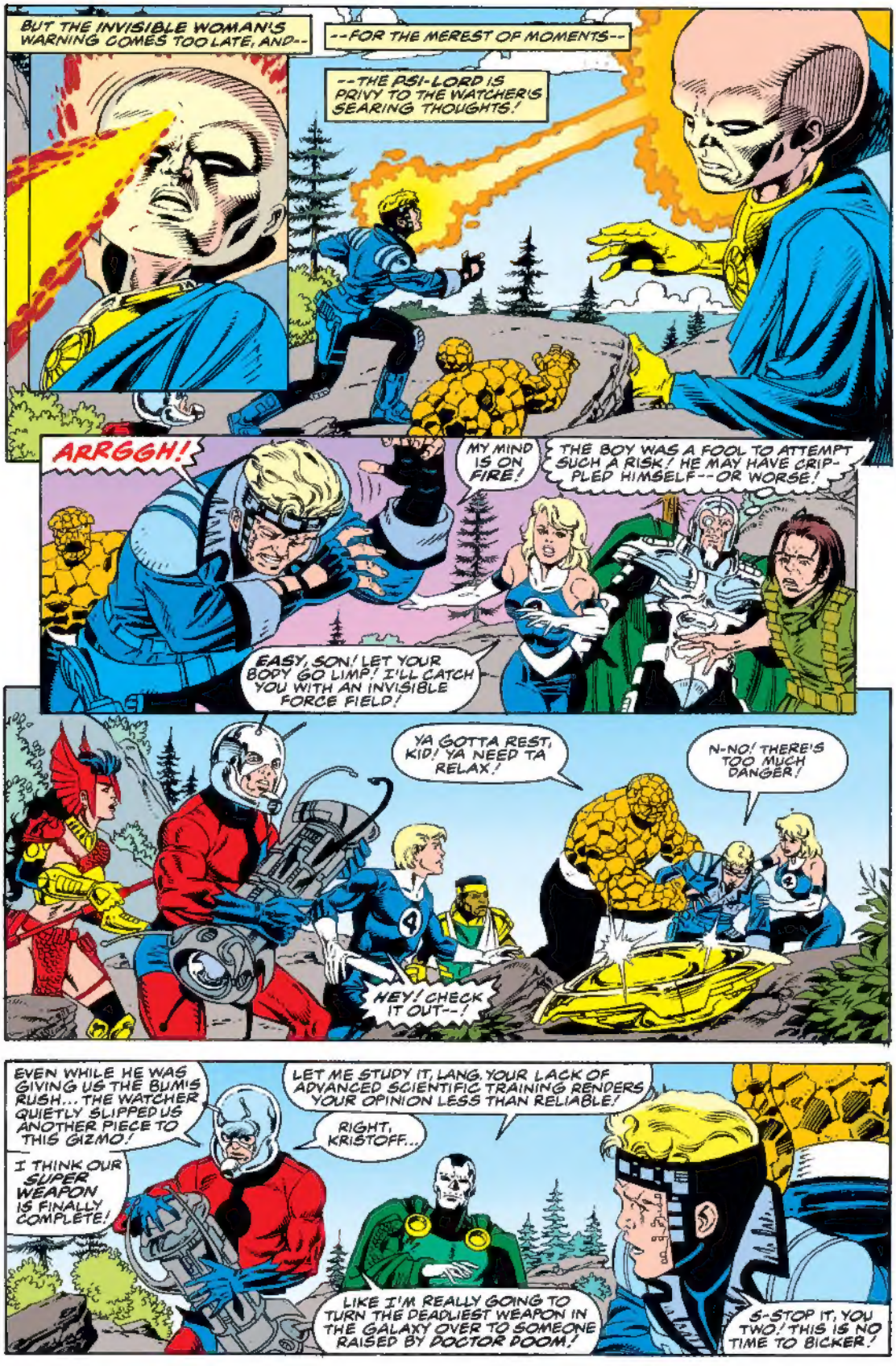
THIS IS IT, TRUE BELIEVER! MIGHTY MARVEL CELEBRATES THE 400TH ISSUE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE WITH A STAR-SPANNING SHOCKER AS THE FABULOUS FANTASTIC FOUR LEARN THAT...

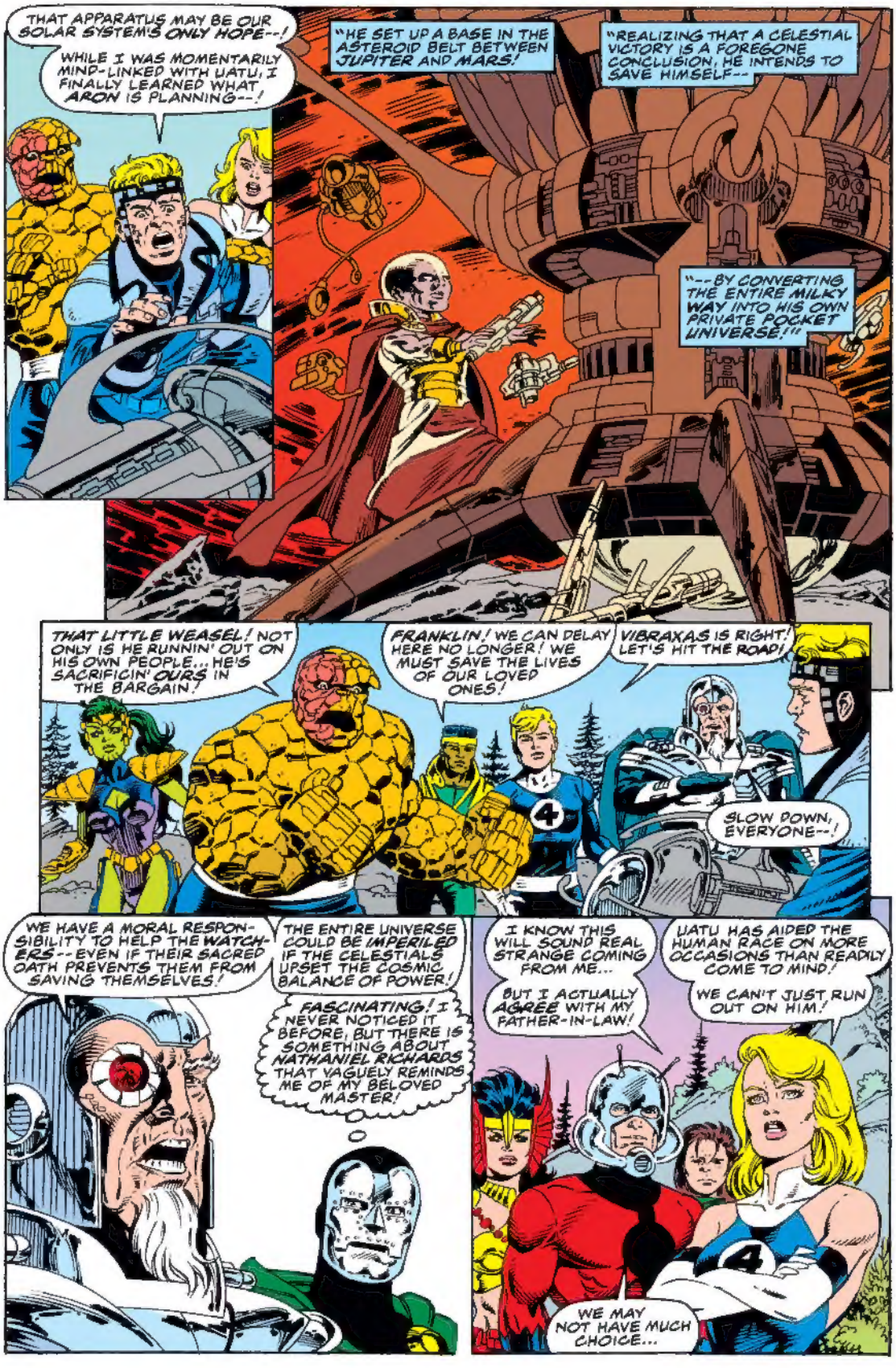
EVEN THE WATCHERS CAN DIE!


BEN! JOHNNY! THIS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER! THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE MAY BE IN DANGER!
WE NEEDED YOU TA REMIND US?!
FRANKLIN! UATU'S OUR ONLY HOPE TO AVERT DISASTER!
I...I'LL TRY TO FIND HIM WITH A LOCALIZED PSI-SCAN, MOM!
POSSESSING ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL TELEPATHIC MINDS ON THE PLANET EARTH, THE LEADER OF THE NEWLY FORMED FANTASTIC FORCE BEGINS TO CONCENTRATE...
THE PSYCHIC INTERFERENCE IS INCREDIBLE! SO MANY ALIEN MINDS... SO MANY BIZARRE AND UNEARTHLY IMAGES!
T-THE STRAIN IS ALMOST MORE THAN I CAN BEAR... BUT... WAIT! I FEEL SOMETHING... SOMEONE... REACHING OUT TO ME!
IT'S HIM! IT'S HIM!
GIVE ME HIS LOCATION, SON! I'LL SURROUND US ALL WITH AN INVISIBLE FORCE FIELD, AND--
NO! THERE'S A FASTER WAY TO REACH HIM--!
HUNTARA--?!
I READ YOU, NEPHEW!
MY PSIONIC SCYTHE WILL INSTANTANEOUSLY CARRY US TO HIM!
WOO-WEE! THAT OVERGROWN TOOTHPICK MUST BE REAL HANDY WHEN THE IRT'S ON STRIKE!
HEY! LOOKEE WHO'S HERE--!
UATU!
UATU!
DON'T YOU DARE IGNORE US, MISTER! WE CAME HALFWAY ACROSS THE COSMOS TO SEE YOU!

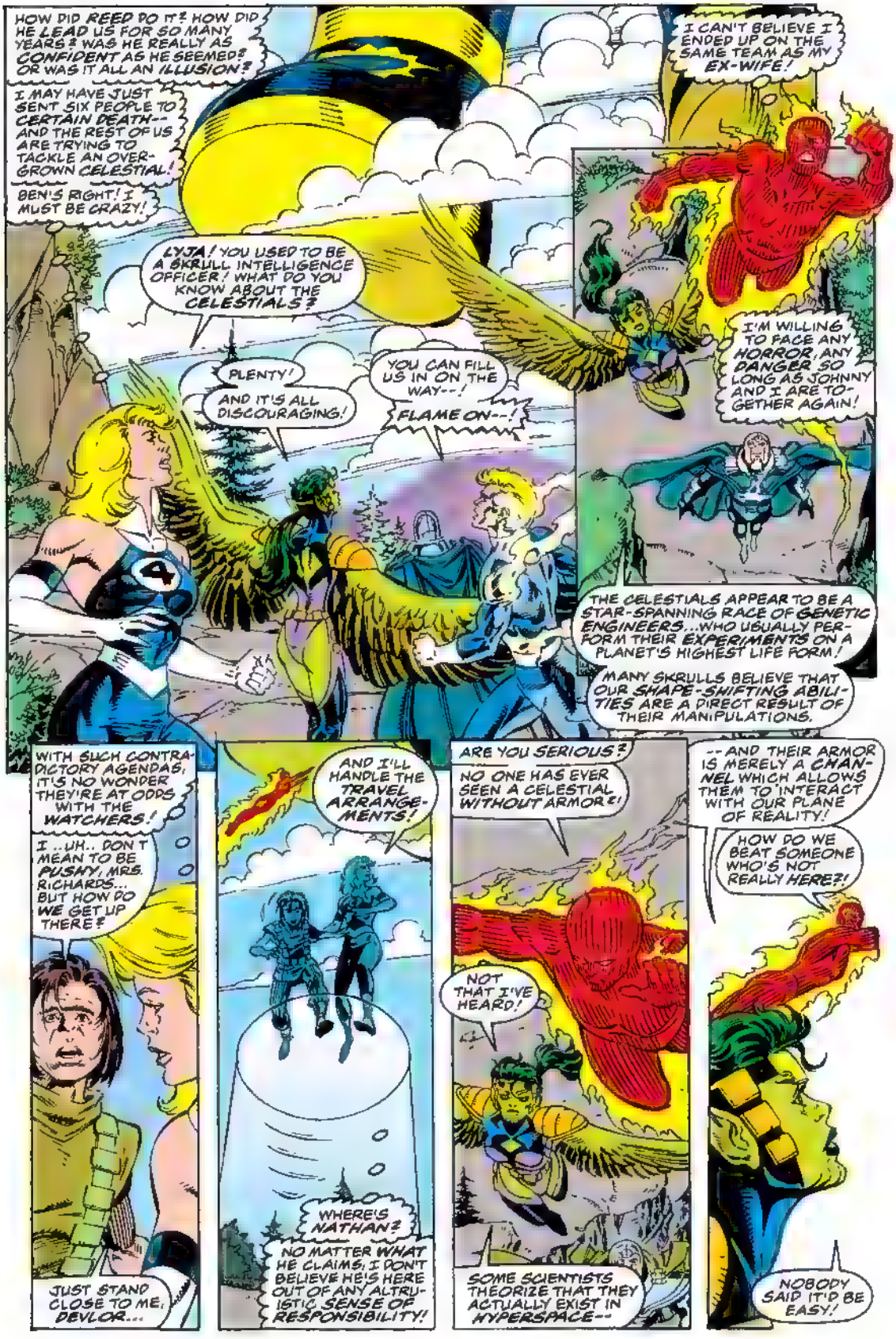

I AM AWARE OF YOUR REASONS FOR SEEKING ME OUT, SUSAN RICHARDS.
YOUR RECENT CONFRONTATIONS WITH ARON THE ROGUE WATCHER... AND HIS AGENT, THE DARK RAIDER... HAVE LED YOU TO CORRECTLY SURMISE THAT THE PHYSICAL PLANE OF REALITY IS IN GRAVE JEOPARDY.
UNFORTUNATELY... AS A WATCHER... I AM FORBIDDEN TO INTERFERE IN THE AFFAIRS OF ANOTHER RACE.
MY SOLE RESPONSIBILITY AT PRESENT IS TO OBSERVE THE FINAL FATE OF THE ONE...
THE ONE WHO IS THE REPOSITORY OF ALL THE KNOWLEDGE, ALL OF THE OBSERVATIONS MY RACE HAS EVER GATHERED.
WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM?
AND WHY DID THAT GIANT CELESTIAL ATTACK HIM?!
"FOR COUNTLESS MILLENNIA, OUR TWO RACES HAVE STOOD IN CONFLICT--
"--STRUGGLING INCESSANTLY ON EVERY LEVEL OF EXISTENCE--
"--IN MANNERS, AND FOR REASONS, WHICH ARE TOTALLY BEYOND HUMAN COMPREHENSION.
ARISHEM, THE CELESTIAL JUDGE, HAS RECENTLY EVALUATED THE ONE--
--DECLARING HIM A THREAT TO THE COSMIC BALANCE OF POWER!
SHEESH! YA SHOULD'A HIRED THEM GUYS WHO DEFENDED OJ!
BEN, PLEASE--!
SAVE YOUR BREATH, MRS. RICHARDS! AN IGNORANT GARGOYLE LIKE GRIMM CANNOT POSSIBLY APPRECIATE THE METAPHYSICAL DRAMA UNFOLDING BEFORE US!
THE POWER THESE BEINGS EMPLOY IS ALMOST UNPALPABLE!
PHOOEY! I HATE WATCHIN' A FIGHT WITHOUT POPCORN!


BEHOLD! FOR THE LAST SEVERAL THOUSAND YEARS, EXITAR THE EXTERMINATOR HAS GATHERED HIS ENERGIES FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF ERADICATING US FROM THIS PARTICULAR REALITY!
THE ONE WILL VANISH FIRST. THE REST WILL FOLLOW.
ARE YOU MAD?! WHY DON'T YOU DEFEND YOURSELVES?
THAT ISN'T THE WAY WATCHERS THINK, HUNTARA!
YOU MEAN THEY'RE JUST GOING TO LET IT HAPPEN?!
GO AHEAD, YA BLASTED IDJIT! THROW IN THE TOWEL ON YER WHOLE BLAMED RACE!
JUST TELL US HOW WE CAN PUT THE BIG KEEBOSH ON OL' ARON BEFORE YA GO!
FURTHER DISCOURSE IS NOT PERMITTED! IT WOULD BE A CLEAR VIOLATION OF MY SACRED OATH!
LISTEN UP, WATCHER! YOU CAN'T JUST BRUSH US OFF LIKE WITLESS GNATS! WE'VE COME TOO FAR! SUFFERED TOO MUCH! WE WILL HAVE THE ANSWERS WE SEEK--
--EVEN IF I MUST FORCE THEM FROM YOU!
SHRAAK!
FRANKLIN, NO--!
NO--!

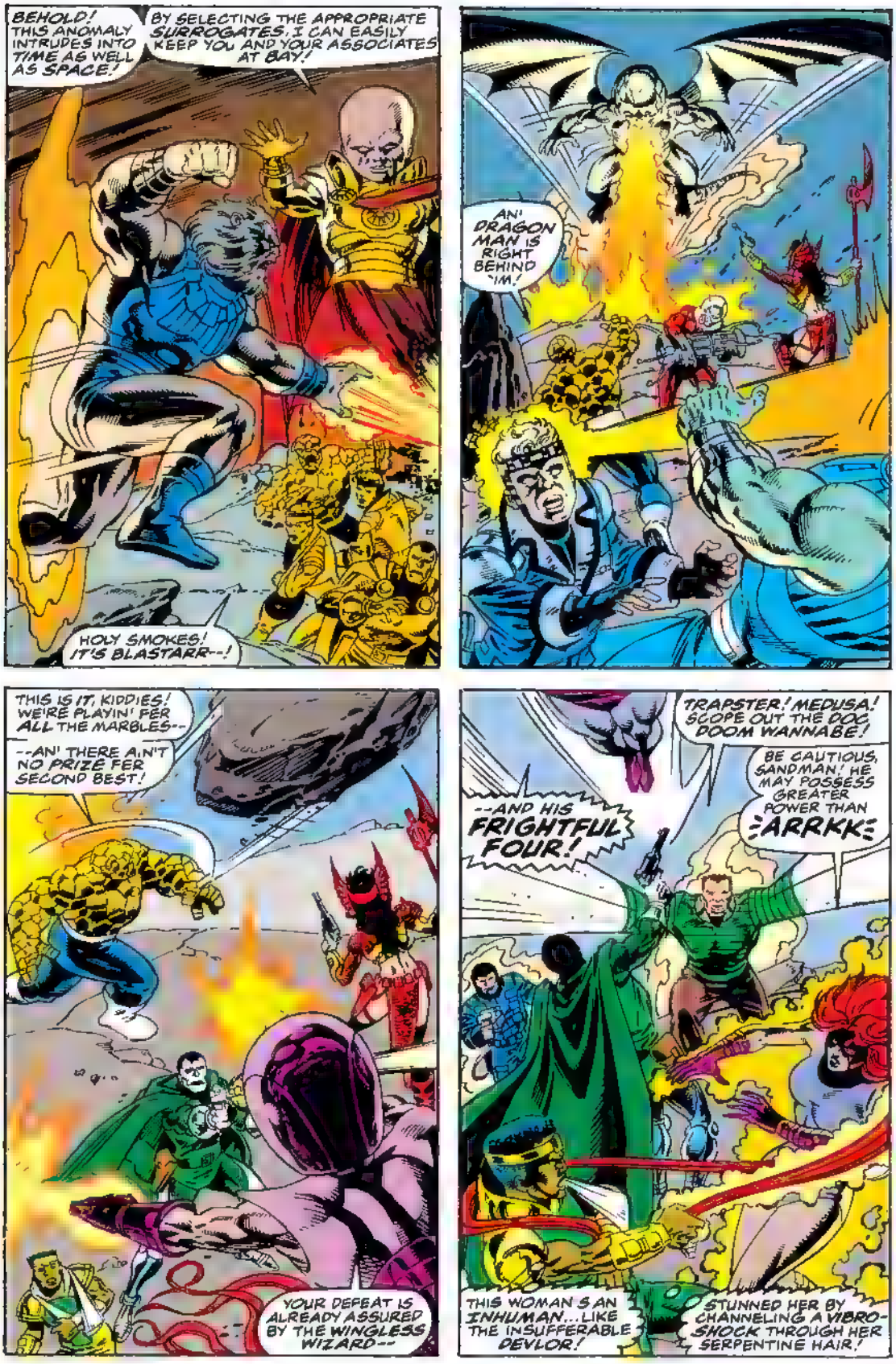

BUT THE INVISIBLE WOMAN'S WARNING COMES TOO LATE, AND--
--FOR THE MEREST OF MOMENTS--
--THE PSI-LORD IS PRIVY TO THE WATCHER'S SEARING THOUGHTS!
ARRGGH!
MY MIND IS ON FIRE!
THE BOY WAS A FOOL TO ATTEMPT SUCH A RISK! HE MAY HAVE CRIPPLED HIMSELF--OR WORSE!
EASY, SON! LET YOUR BODY GO LIMP! I'LL CATCH YOU WITH AN INVISIBLE FORCE FIELD!
YA GOTTA REST, KID! YA NEED TA RELAX!
N-NO! THERE'S TOO MUCH DANGER!
HEY! CHECK IT OUT--!
EVEN WHILE HE WAS GIVING US THE BUM'S RUSH... THE WATCHER QUIETLY SLIPPED US ANOTHER PIECE TO THIS GIZMO!
I THINK OUR SUPER WEAPON IS FINALLY COMPLETE!
LET ME STUDY IT, LANG. YOUR LACK OF ADVANCED SCIENTIFIC TRAINING RENDERS YOUR OPINION LESS THAN RELIABLE!
RIGHT, KRISTOFF...
LIKE I'M REALLY GOING TO TURN THE DEADLIEST WEAPON IN THE GALAXY OVER TO SOMEONE RAISED BY DOCTOR DOOM!
S-STOP IT, YOU TWO! THIS IS NO TIME TO BICKER!

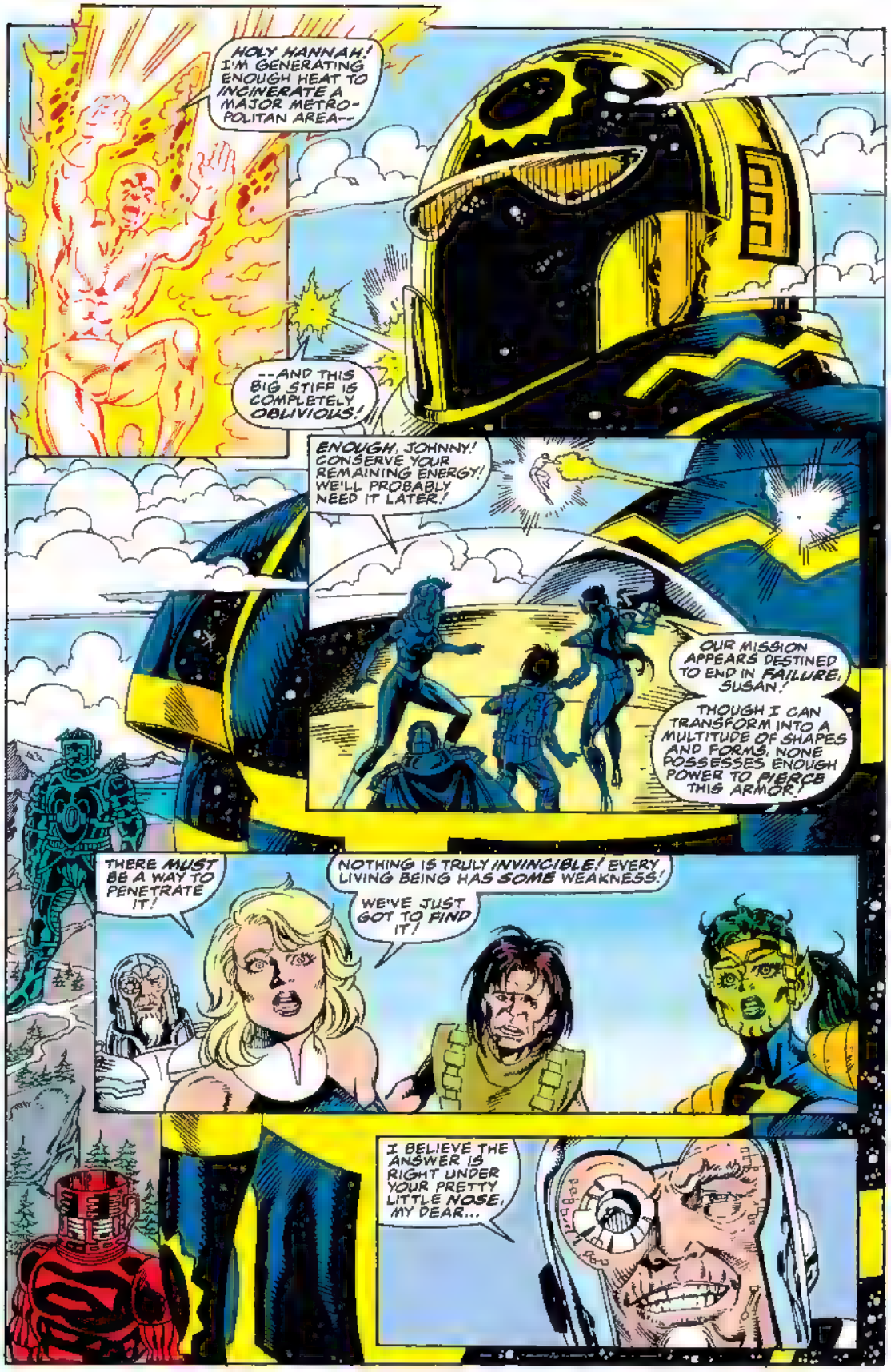

THAT APPARATUS MAY BE OUR SOLAR SYSTEM'S ONLY HOPE--!
WHILE I WAS MOMENTARILY MIND-LINKED WITH UATU, I FINALLY LEARNED WHAT ARON IS PLANNING--!
"HE SET UP A BASE IN THE ASTEROID BELT BETWEEN JUPITER AND MARS!
"REALIZING THAT A CELESTIAL VICTORY IS A FOREGONE CONCLUSION, HE INTENDS TO SAVE HIMSELF--
"--BY CONVERTING THE ENTIRE MILKY WAY INTO HIS OWN PRIVATE POCKET UNIVERSE!!!"
THAT LITTLE WEASEL! NOT ONLY IS HE RUNNIN' OUT ON HIS OWN PEOPLE... HE'S SACRIFICIN' OURS IN THE BARGAIN!
FRANKLIN! WE CAN DELAY HERE NO LONGER! WE MUST SAVE THE LIVES OF OUR LOVED ONES!
VIBRAXAS IS RIGHT! LET'S HIT THE ROAD!
SLOW DOWN, EVERYONE--!
WE HAVE A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO HELP THE WATCHERS--EVEN IF THEIR SACRED OATH PREVENTS THEM FROM SAVING THEMSELVES!
THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE COULD BE IMPERILED IF THE CELESTIALS UPSET THE COSMIC BALANCE OF POWER!
FASCINATING! I NEVER NOTICED IT BEFORE, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT NATHANIEL RICHARDS THAT VAGUELY REMINDS ME OF MY BELOVED MASTER!
I KNOW THIS WILL SOUND REAL STRANGE COMING FROM ME...
BUT I ACTUALLY AGREE WITH MY FATHER-IN-LAW!
UATU HAS AIDED THE HUMAN RACE ON MORE OCCASIONS THAN READILY COME TO MIND!
WE CAN'T JUST RUN OUT ON HIM!
WE MAY NOT HAVE MUCH CHOICE...

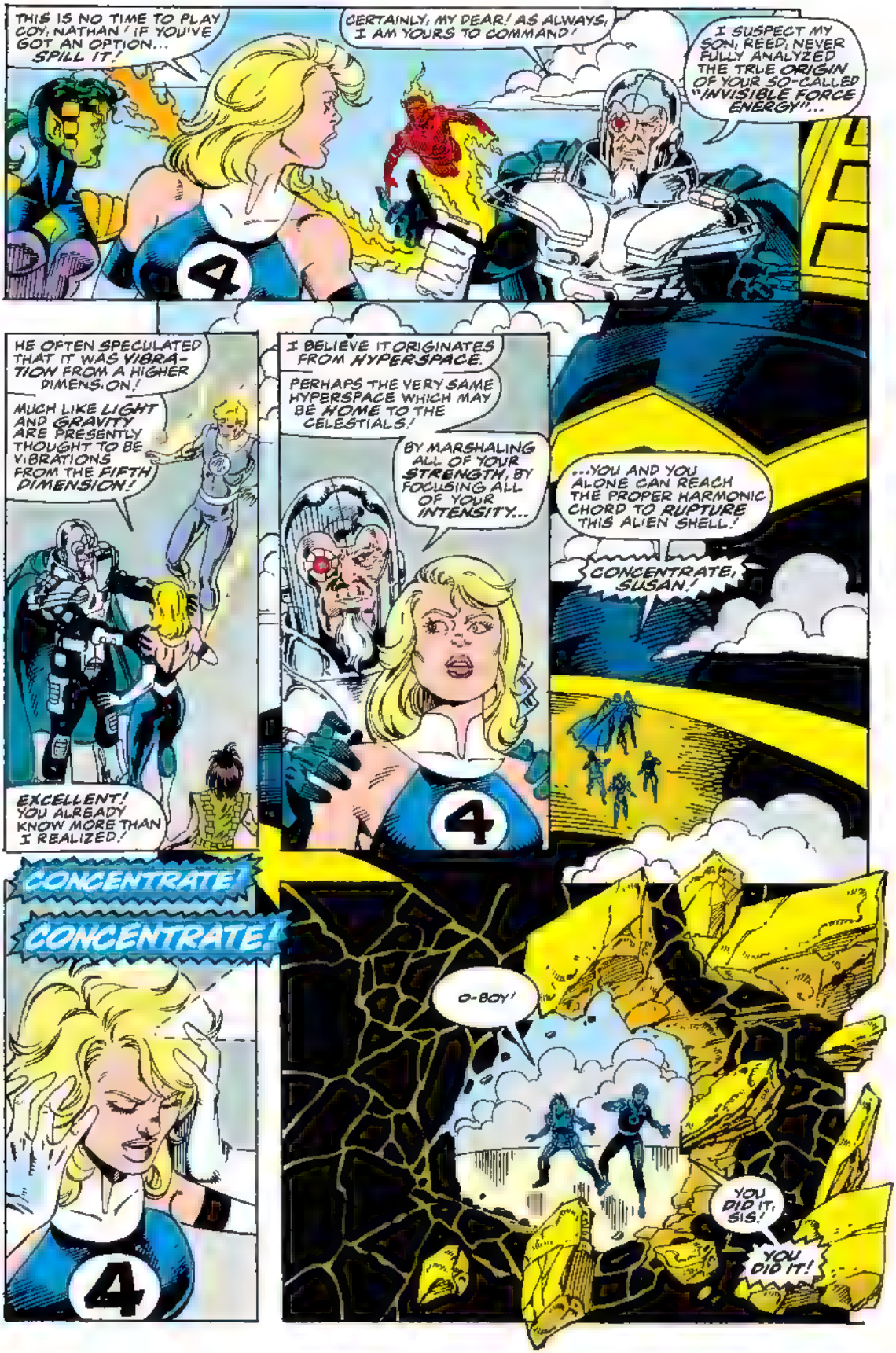
UATU ONLY PROVIDED ONE SUPER WEAPON!
NO PROBLEM! THAT'S EASILY SOLVED...
BEN! ASSEMBLE A TEAM... GRAB THE WEAPON... AND GIVE OUR REGARDS TO ARON!
YER TAKIN' ON THE CELESTIALS?
ARE YOU OUTTA YER EVER-LOVIN' MIND?!
PERHAPS.
FRANKLIN, I REALIZE THE FANTASTIC FORCE IS YOUR TEAM, AND WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASSUME--
SAY NO MORE, MOM! WE'D CONSIDER IT A PRIVILEGE TO FIGHT SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH THE FANTASTIC FOUR!
TEMPERS FLARE OVER THE NEXT FEW MINUTES AS THE TWO TEAMS ARE QUICKLY REALIGNED, AND THEN..
FRANKLIN, BEFORE YOU GO...
YOU DON'T HAVE TO SAY ANYTHING, MOM!
I'LL PSI-LINK EVERYTHING I LEECHED OUT OF UATU ABOUT THE CELESTIAL YOU'RE ABOUT TO FACE--
--AND WE CAN SAY GOODBYE IN OUR OWN PRIVATE WAY!
ALL RIGHT! LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD--!
GOOD LUCK TO YOU ALL!
WARRIORS ASSEMBLE!
VIBRAXAS! THING! PSI-LORD! ANT-MAN! KRISTOFF! OUR SPACE WARP AWAITS--!


HOW DID REED DO IT? HOW DID HE LEAD US FOR SO MANY YEARS? WAS HE REALLY AS CONFIDENT AS HE SEEMED? OR WAS IT ALL AN ILLUSION?
I MAY HAVE JUST SENT SIX PEOPLE TO CERTAIN DEATH-- AND THE REST OF US ARE TRYING TO TACKLE AN OVER-GROWN CELESTIAL!
BEN'S RIGHT! I MUST BE CRAZY!
I CAN'T BELIEVE I ENDED UP ON THE SAME TEAM AS MY EX-WIFE!
LYJA! YOU USED TO BE A SKRULL INTELLIGENCE OFFICER! WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CELESTIALS?
PLENTY!
AND IT'S ALL DISCOURAGING!
YOU CAN FILL US IN ON THE WAY--!
FLAME ON--!
I'M WILLING TO FACE ANY HORROR, ANY DANGER SO LONG AS JOHNNY AND I ARE TOGETHER AGAIN!
THE CELESTIALS APPEAR TO BE A STAR-SPANNING RACE OF GENETIC ENGINEERS...WHO USUALLY PERFORM THEIR EXPERIMENTS ON A PLANET'S HIGHEST LIFE FORM!
MANY SKRULLS BELIEVE THAT OUR SHAPE-SHIFTING ABILITIES ARE A DIRECT RESULT OF THEIR MANIPULATIONS.
WITH SUCH CONTRADICTORY AGENDAS, IT'S NO WONDER THEY'RE AT ODDS WITH THE WATCHERS!
I..UH.. DON'T MEAN TO BE PUSHY, MRS. RICHARDS... BUT HOW DO WE GET UP THERE?
JUST STAND CLOSE TO ME, DEVLOR...
AND I'LL HANDLE THE TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS!
WHERE'S NATHAN?
NO MATTER WHAT HE CLAIMS, I DON'T BELIEVE HE'S HERE OUT OF ANY ALTRUISTIC SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY!
ARE YOU SERIOUS?
NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN A CELESTIAL WITHOUT ARMOR?!
NOT THAT I'VE HEARD!
SOME SCIENTISTS THEORIZE THAT THEY ACTUALLY EXIST IN HYPERSPACE--
--AND THEIR ARMOR IS MERELY A CHANNEL WHICH ALLOWS THEM TO INTERACT WITH OUR PLANE OF REALITY!
HOW DO WE BEAT SOMEONE WHO'S NOT REALLY HERE?!
NOBODY SAID IT'D BE EASY!

AT THAT VERY MOMENT, WITHIN A GLOWING ANOMALY WHICH SQUATS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE ORBITS OF MARS AND JUPITER--
--ARON THE ROGUE WATCHER CALMLY ASSEMBLES A MOST DEADLY DEVICE!
WITH THE AID OF THE DARK RAIDER, I MODIFIED THE ULTIMATE NULLIFIER INTO A UNIVERSAL CONVERTER!
SOON I WILL TRANSFORM THIS DECADENT SOLAR SYSTEM... INTO A NEW AND VITAL POCKET UNIVERSE!
SORRY, CHARLIE! THE ONLY RENOVATION YER ZONED FER IS TO--
--YER EVER-LOVIN', PASTY-FEATURED FACE!
WE ALREADY GOT MORE'N ENUFF NEW UNIVERSES TA GAG GALACTUS!
COME NOW, GRIMM... EVEN YOU CANNOT BE DELUDED ENOUGH TO BELIEVE YOU HAVE THE SLIGHTEST CHANCE OF DEFEATING ME AT THIS LATE STAGE!
YOUR SITUATION IS TOTALLY HOPELESS!
HOPELESS, MY FOOT!
HERE YA GO, SCOTT ...THIS BABY'S ALL YOURS!
I GOT A HANKERIN' TA CLOBBER THIS CREEP THE OLD FASHIONED WAY!
YOUR IGNORANCE IS FAR GREATER THAN EVER CONJECTURED! I WILL NOT SOIL MY HANDS IN MINDLESS COMBAT!


BEHOLD! THIS ANOMALY INTRUDES INTO TIME AS WELL AS SPACE!
BY SELECTING THE APPROPRIATE SURROGATES, I CAN EASILY KEEP YOU AND YOUR ASSOCIATES AT BAY!
HOLY SMOKES! IT'S BLASTARR--!
AN' DRAGON MAN IS RIGHT BEHIND 'IM!
THIS IS IT, KIDDIES! WE'RE PLAYIN' FER ALL THE MARBLES--
--AN' THERE AIN'T NO PRIZE FER SECOND BEST!
YOUR DEFEAT IS ALREADY ASSURED BY THE WINGLESS WIZARD--
TRAPSTER! MEDUSA! SCOPE OUT THE DOC DOOM WANNABE!
BE CAUTIOUS, SANDMAN! HE MAY POSSESS GREATER POWER THAN :ARRKK:
--AND HIS FRIGHTFUL FOUR!
THIS WOMAN S AN INHUMAN... LIKE THE INSUFFERABLE DEVLOR!
STUNNED HER BY CHANNELING A VIBRO-SHOCK THROUGH HER SERPENTINE HAIR!

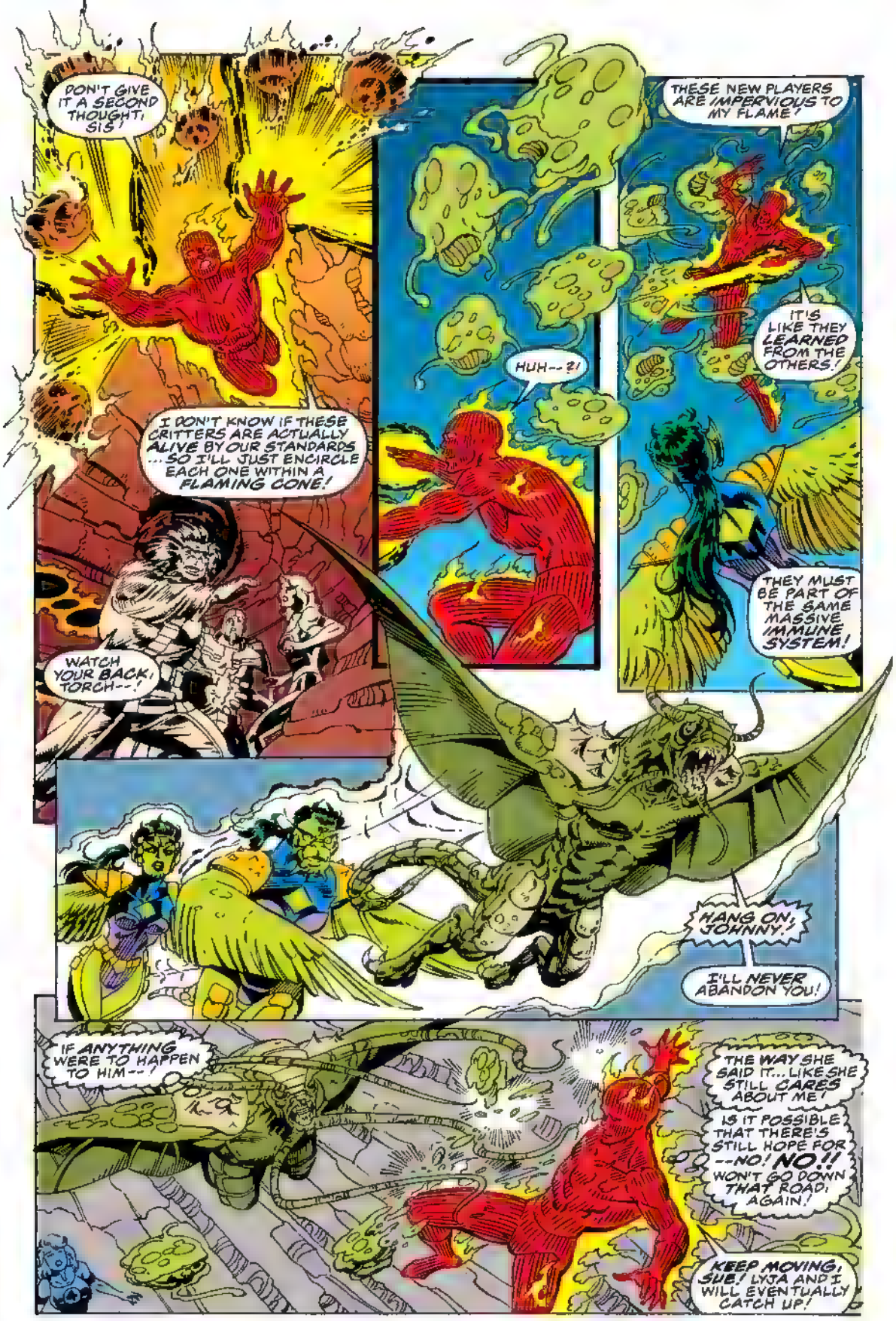

HOLY HANNAH! I'M GENERATING ENOUGH HEAT TO INCINERATE A MAJOR METRO-POLITAN AREA--
--AND THIS BIG STIFF IS COMPLETELY OBLIVIOUS!
ENOUGH, JOHNNY! CONSERVE YOUR REMAINING ENERGY! WE'LL PROBABLY NEED IT LATER!
OUR MISSION APPEARS DESTINED TO END IN FAILURE, SUSAN!
THOUGH I CAN TRANSFORM INTO A MULTITUDE OF SHAPES AND FORMS, NONE POSSESSES ENOUGH POWER TO PIERCE THIS ARMOR!
THERE MUST BE A WAY TO PENETRATE IT!
NOTHING IS TRULY INVINCIBLE! EVERY LIVING BEING HAS SOME WEAKNESS!
WE'VE JUST GOT TO FIND IT!
I BELIEVE THE ANSWER IS RIGHT UNDER YOUR PRETTY LITTLE NOSE, MY DEAR...

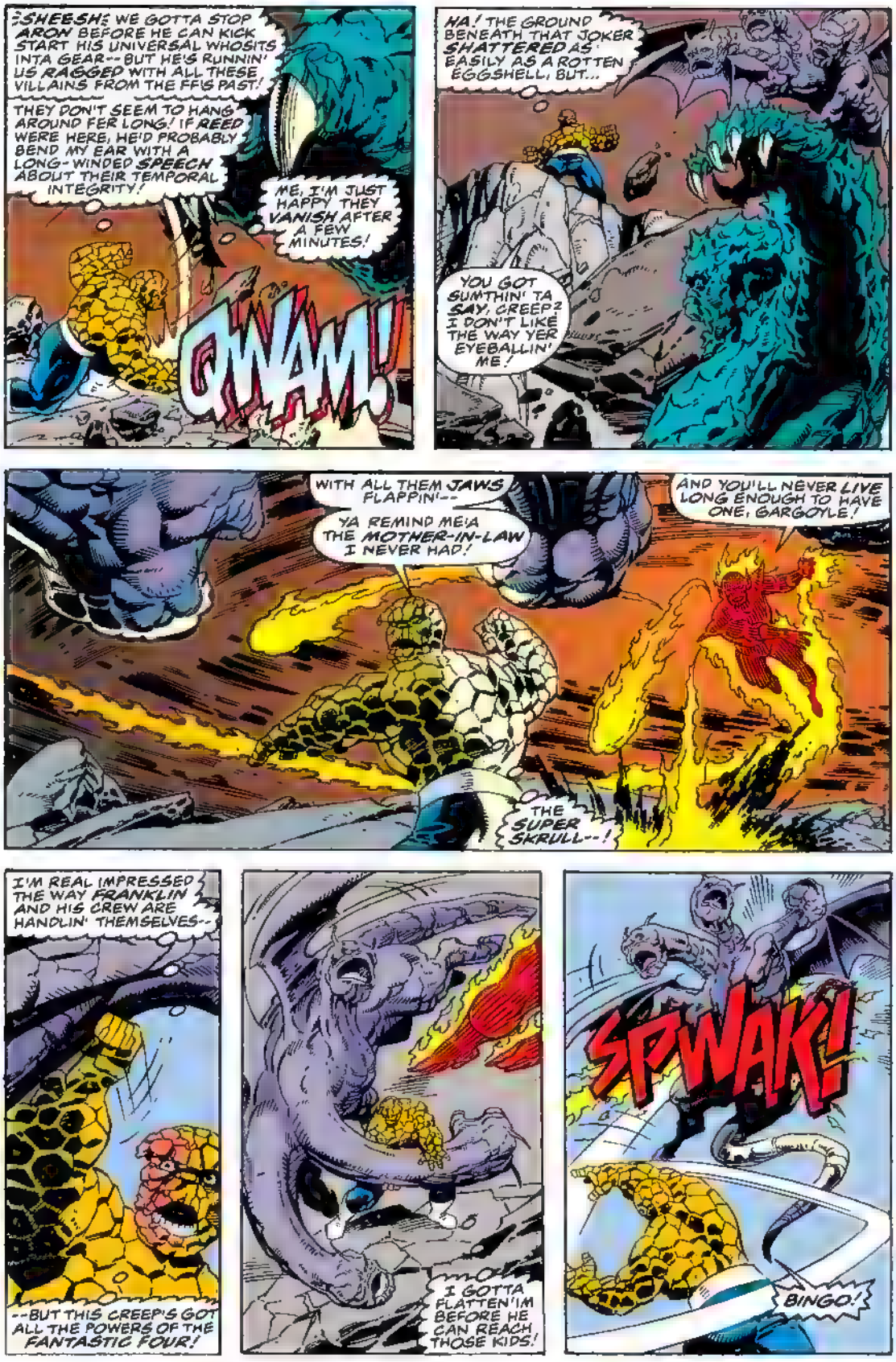

THIS IS NO TIME TO PLAY COY, NATHAN! IF YOU'VE GOT AN OPTION... SPILL IT!
CERTAINLY, MY DEAR! AS ALWAYS, I AM YOURS TO COMMAND!
I SUSPECT MY SON, REED, NEVER FULLY ANALYZED THE TRUE ORIGIN OF YOUR SO-CALLED "INVISIBLE FORCE ENERGY"...
HE OFTEN SPECULATED THAT IT WAS VIBRATION FROM A HIGHER DIMENSION!
MUCH LIKE LIGHT AND GRAVITY ARE PRESENTLY THOUGHT TO BE VIBRATIONS FROM THE FIFTH DIMENSION!
EXCELLENT! YOU ALREADY KNOW MORE THAN I REALIZED!
I BELIEVE IT ORIGINATES FROM HYPERSPACE.
PERHAPS THE VERY SAME HYPERSPACE WHICH MAY BE HOME TO THE CELESTIALS!
BY MARSHALING ALL OF YOUR STRENGTH, BY FOCUSING ALL OF YOUR INTENSITY...
...YOU AND YOU ALONE CAN REACH THE PROPER HARMONIC CHORD TO RUPTURE THIS ALIEN SHELL!
CONCENTRATE, SUSAN!
CONCENTRATE!
CONCENTRATE!
O-BOY!
YOU DID IT, SIS!
YOU DID IT!

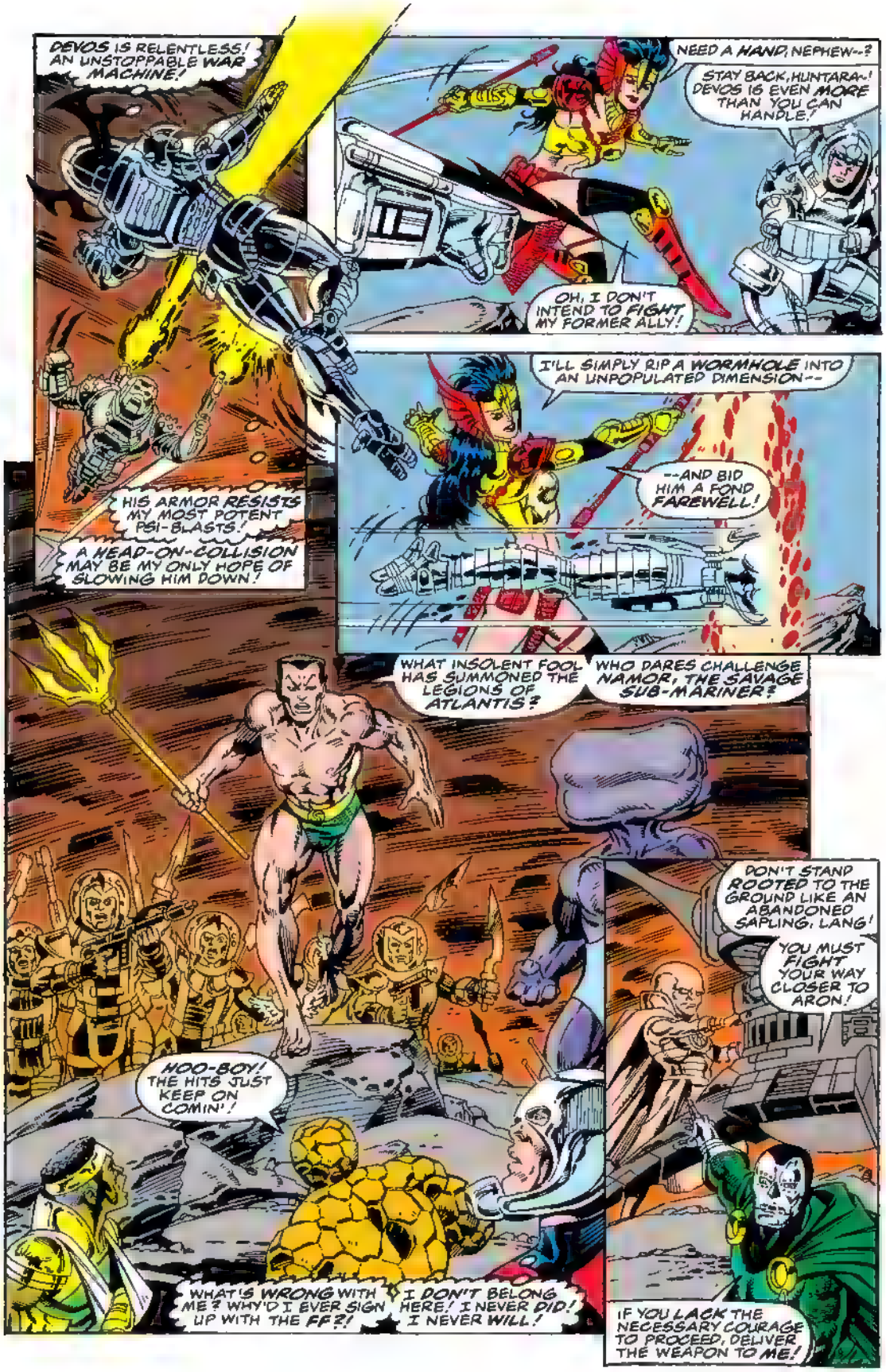
REJOICE, MY PETS! FATE HAS DELIVERED THE THING INTO THE HANDS OF THE RED GHOST AND HIS SUPER APES!
I ASSUME THESE ARE BIG FANS OF YOURS!
ISN'T EVERYONE?
INTERESTING! THE ORANGUTAN APPEARS TO PROJECT SOME SORT OF MAGNETIC RAYS!
THINK YOU GOT PROBLEMS? NOT ONLY IS THIS MANGY HAIRBALL AS STRONG AS ME--
--HE'S TWICE AS CUTE!
WOE TO HIM WHO HAS TRANSPORTED ME TO THIS NAMELESS PLACE!
FOR ALL WHO LIVE ARE MY ENEMIES!
TIME TO ACTIVATE MY PSI-LORD ARMOR! THAT CREATURE IS ANNIHILUS, THE LIVING DEATH!
I STILL HAVE NIGHT SWEATS WHENEVER I DREAM OF HOW HE TORTURED AND ALMOST KILLED ME WHILE I WAS ONLY A CHILD!

BUT I AM A CHILD NO MORE--!
AYEEE!
TAGGED HIM WITH A QUICK PSI-BLAST!
NO TIME TO GLOAT! SOMEONE'S SWOOPING TOWARD ME!
DEVOS, THE DEVASTATOR!
HOW DO YOU KNOW OF ME, STRIPLING? WE HAVE NEVER FOUGHT IN THE PAST!
BUT WE WILL IN YOUR FUTURE!
STRIKE, MY BEAUTIES! CRUSH THOSE WHO WOULD DEFY THE MOLE MAN!
PHOOEY! IT'LL TAKE MORE'N A PAIR OF OVER-GROWN MOVIE MONSTERS TA IMPRESS ME!
PERHAPS, THE FELINE AGILITY OF THE BLACK PANTHER WILL SERVE YOU BETTER!
MY NOBLE CHIEFTAIN--?! HAS HE COME TO AID US, OR ADD TO OUR MISERY?

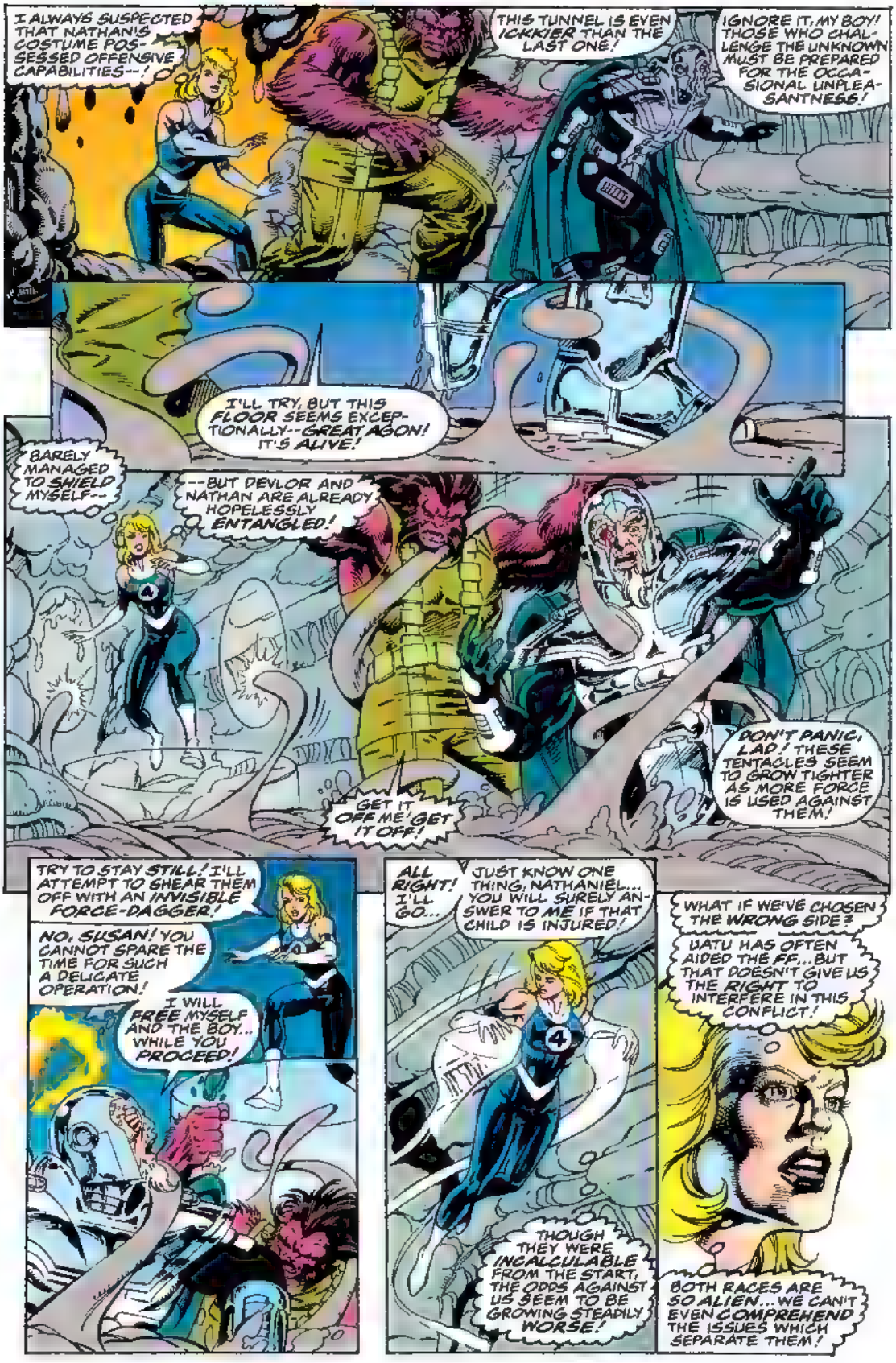
WHOO-BABY! TALK ABOUT FALLING THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS!
THIS WIDE AND WILD CANAL MUST BE THE CELESTIAL EQUIVALENT OF A MAIN BLOOD ARTERY!
JOHNNY, YOU'RE TAKING THE BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD APPROACH TO ALIENO-PHYSIOLOGY IF YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE SPACE GODS CAN BE EQUATED WITH HUMANS!
CONSIDERING OUR SURROUNDINGS, I'M GLAD I CHANGED FORMS!
THE INTERIOR OF A CELESTIAL--! MY ARMOR'S COMPUTERS ARE STRAINING TO ANALYZE THIS INCRED-IBLE ENVIRONMENT!
YOU SEEM QUITE PLEASED WITH YOURSELF!
WE ARE EXPLORING ONE OF THE GREAT MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE, MY DEAR!
THINK OF THE SECRETS, THE POWER WHICH COULD SOON BE MI. . OURS!
THIS IS NO SCIENCE OUTING, MISTER! WE HAVE A JOB TO DO, AND--
UH...I REALLY HATE TO INTERRUPT, MRS. RICHARDS, BUT..
WE GOT COMPANY!

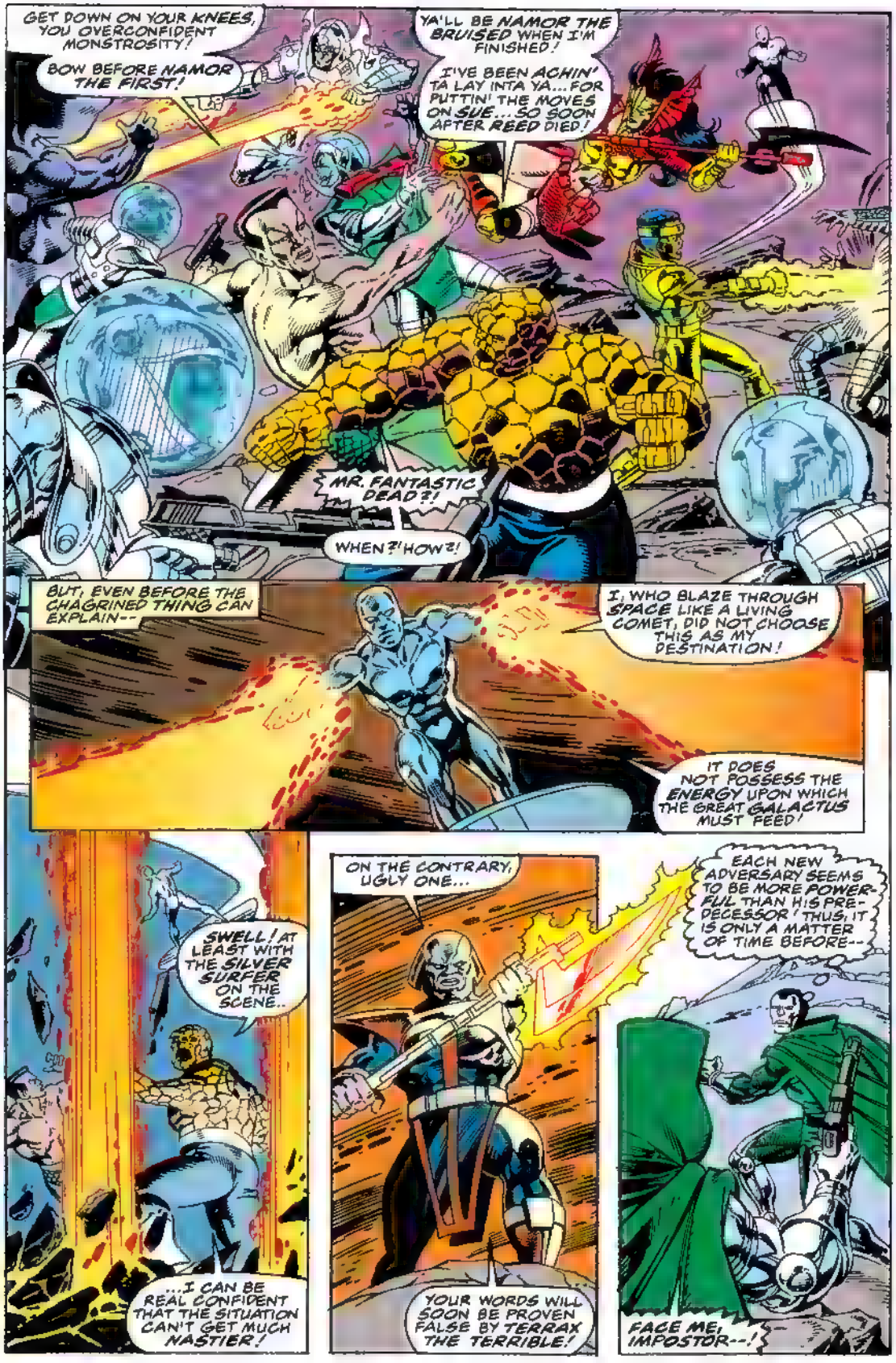

DON'T GIVE IT A SECOND THOUGHT, SIS!
I DON'T KNOW IF THESE CRITTERS ARE ACTUALLY ALIVE BY OUR STANDARDS ... SO I'LL JUST ENCIRCLE EACH ONE WITHIN A FLAMING CONE!
WATCH YOUR BACK, TORCH--!
HUH--?!
THESE NEW PLAYERS ARE IMPERVIOUS TO MY FLAME!
IT'S LIKE THEY LEARNED FROM THE OTHERS!
THEY MUST BE PART OF THE SAME MASSIVE IMMUNE SYSTEM!
HANG ON, JOHNNY!
I'LL NEVER ABANDON YOU!
IF ANYTHING WERE TO HAPPEN TO HIM--!
THE WAY SHE SAID IT... LIKE SHE STILL CARES ABOUT ME!
IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THERE'S STILL HOPE FOR--
--NO! NO!! WON'T GO DOWN THAT ROAD AGAIN!
KEEP MOVING, SUE! LYJA AND I WILL EVENTUALLY CATCH UP!


SHEESH! WE GOTTA STOP ARON BEFORE HE CAN KICK START HIS UNIVERSAL WHOSITS INTA GEAR--BUT HE'S RUNNIN' US RAGGED WITH ALL THESE VILLAINS FROM THE FF'S PAST!
THEY DON'T SEEM TO HANG AROUND FER LONG! IF REED WERE HERE, HE'D PROBABLY BEND MY EAR WITH A LONG-WINDED SPEECH ABOUT THEIR TEMPORAL INTEGRITY!
ME, I'M JUST HAPPY THEY VANISH AFTER A FEW MINUTES!
OWAM!
HA! THE GROUND BENEATH THAT JOKER SHATTERED AS EASILY AS A ROTTEN EGGSHELL, BUT...
YOU GOT SUMTHIN' TA SAY, CREEP? I DON'T LIKE THE WAY YER EYEBALLIN' ME!
WITH ALL THEM JAWS FLAPPIN'--
YA REMIND ME'A THE MOTHER-IN-LAW I NEVER HAD!
AND YOU'LL NEVER LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO HAVE ONE, GARGOYLE!
THE SUPER SKRULL--!
I'M REAL IMPRESSED THE WAY FRANKLIN AND HIS CREW ARE HANDLIN' THEMSELVES--
--BUT THIS CREEP'S GOT ALL THE POWERS OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR!
I GOTTA FLATTEN 'IM BEFORE HE CAN REACH THOSE KIDS!
SPWAK!
BINGO!

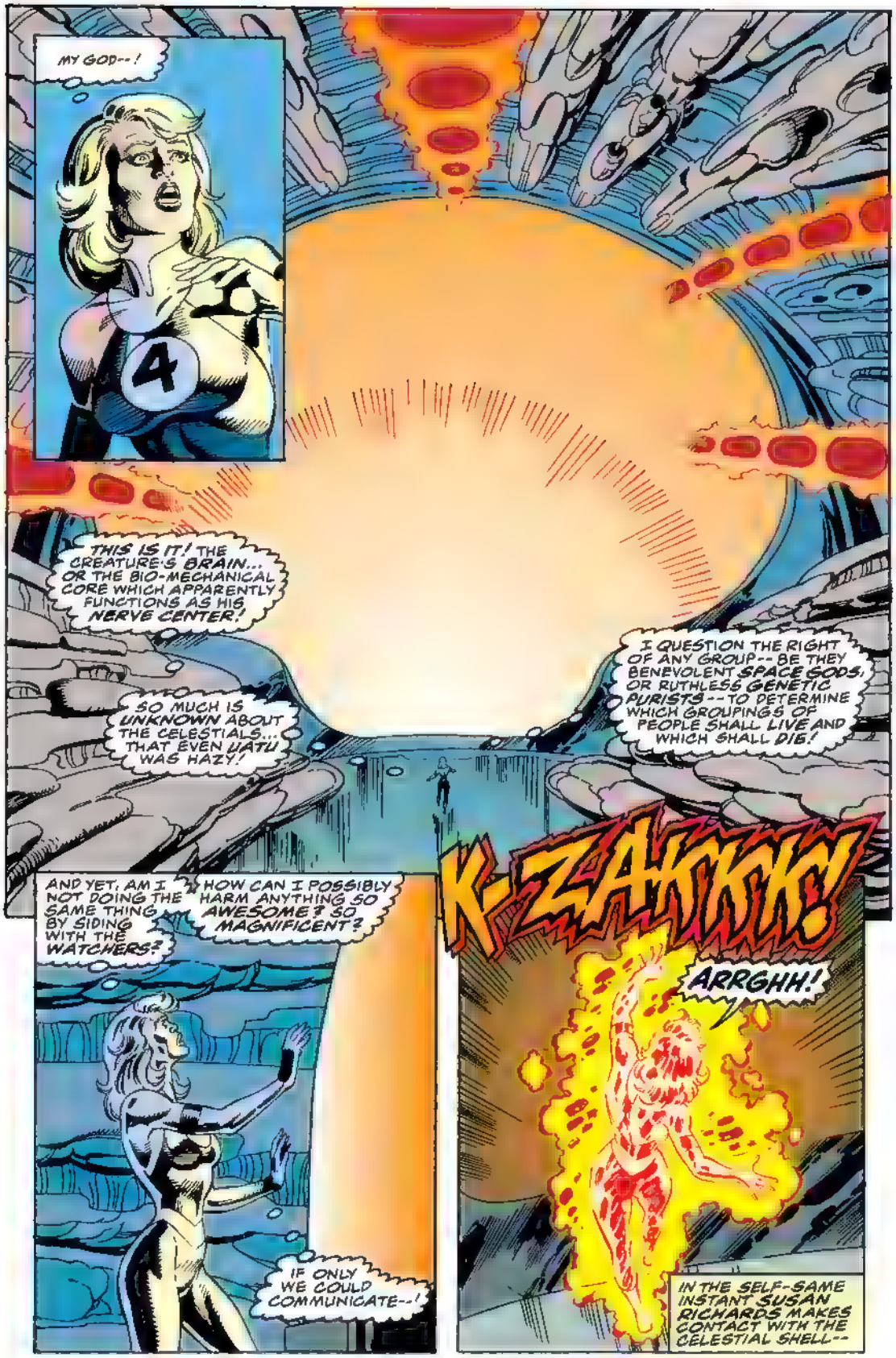

DEVOS IS RELENTLESS! AN UNSTOPPABLE WAR MACHINE!
NEED A HAND, NEPHEW--?
STAY BACK, HUNTARA--! DEVOS IS EVEN MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE!
OH, I DON'T INTEND TO FIGHT MY FORMER ALLY!
I'LL SIMPLY RIP A WORMHOLE INTO AN UNPOPULATED DIMENSION--
--AND BID HIM A FOND FAREWELL!
HIS ARMOR RESISTS MY MOST POTENT PSI-BLASTS!
A HEAD-ON-COLLISION MAY BE MY ONLY HOPE OF SLOWING HIM DOWN!
WHAT INSOLENT FOOL HAS SUMMONED THE LEGIONS OF ATLANTIS?
WHO DARES CHALLENGE NAMOR, THE SAVAGE SUB-MARINER?
DON'T STAND ROOTED TO THE GROUND LIKE AN ABANDONED SAPLING, LANG!
YOU MUST FIGHT YOUR WAY CLOSER TO ARON!
HOO-BOY! THE HITS JUST KEEP ON COMIN'!
WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME? WHY'D I EVER SIGN UP WITH THE FF?!
I DON'T BELONG HERE! I NEVER DID! I NEVER WILL!
IF YOU LACK THE NECESSARY COURAGE TO PROCEED, DELIVER THE WEAPON TO ME!

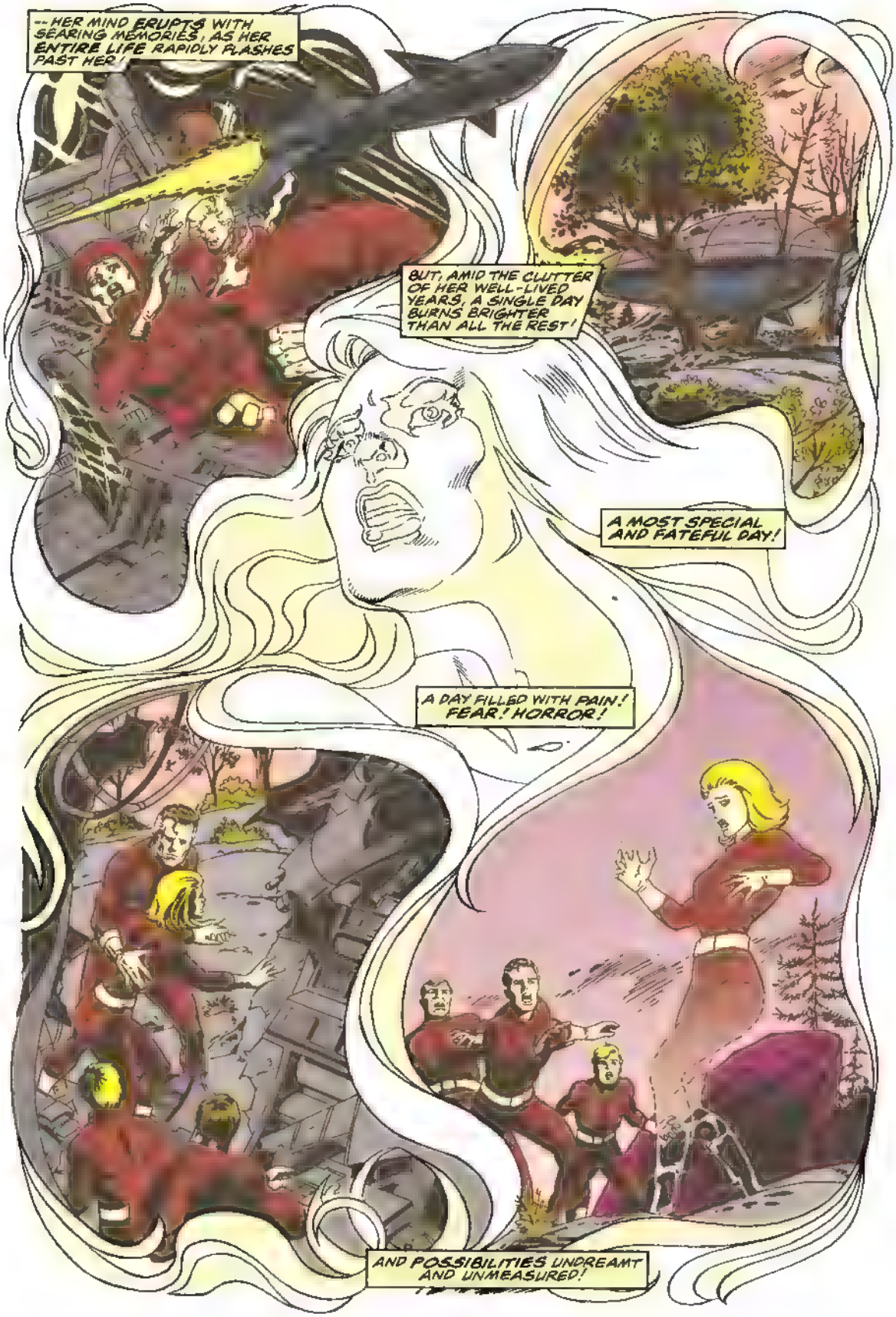
SO MANY UNCANNY SIGHTS! SO MANY BIZARRE WONDERS!
REED SHOULD BE HERE TO EXPERIENCE THEM--! HE'D KNOW HOW TO SAVE THE WATCHERS!
ACCORDING TO THE INFORMATION FRANKLIN DOWNLOADED INTO MY MIND, WE MUST CONTINUE IN THIS DIRECTION--!
YOU'RE THE BOSS, MRS. RICHARDS!
THAT VALVE-LIKE STRUCTURE BLOCKS OUR PATH!
YEECH! THIS SURFACE FEELS SO WARM AND SLIMY... I'M GETTING NAUSEOUS JUST POUNDING ON IT!
LET'S NOT TEMPT FATE, DEVLOR! THERE IS NO NEED FOR YOU TO RISK GETTING SICK ON US!
HEY! I WAS ONLY EXAGGERATING! IT'S NOT LIKE I'M GONNA LOSE MY LUNCH OR ANYTHING!
I HAVE THE UTMOST CONFIDENCE IN YOU, MY LAD--
--BUT I ALSO HAVE AN EASIER WAY TO GAIN ENTRANCE!


I ALWAYS SUSPECTED THAT NATHAN'S COSTUME POSSESSED OFFENSIVE CAPABILITIES--!
THIS TUNNEL IS EVEN ICKKIER THAN THE LAST ONE!
IGNORE IT, MY BOY! THOSE WHO CHALLENGE THE UNKNOWN MUST BE PREPARED FOR THE OCCASIONAL UNPLEASANTNESS!
I'LL TRY, BUT THIS FLOOR SEEMS EXCEPTIONALLY--GREAT AGON! IT'S ALIVE!
BARELY MANAGED TO SHIELD MYSELF--
--BUT DEVLOR AND NATHAN ARE ALREADY HOPELESSLY ENTANGLED!
DON'T PANIC, LAD! THESE TENTACLES SEEM TO GROW TIGHTER AS MORE FORCE IS USED AGAINST THEM!
GET IT OFF ME! GET IT OFF!
TRY TO STAY STILL! I'LL ATTEMPT TO SHEAR THEM OFF WITH AN INVISIBLE FORCE-DAGGER!
NO, SUSAN! YOU CANNOT SPARE THE TIME FOR SUCH A DELICATE OPERATION!
I WILL FREE MYSELF AND THE BOY... WHILE YOU PROCEED!
ALL RIGHT! I'LL GO...
JUST KNOW ONE THING, NATHANIEL... YOU WILL SURELY ANSWER TO ME IF THAT CHILD IS INJURED!
THOUGH THEY WERE INCALCULABLE FROM THE START, THE ODDS AGAINST US SEEM TO BE GROWING STEADILY WORSE!
WHAT IF WE'VE CHOSEN THE WRONG SIDE?
UATU HAS OFTEN AIDED THE FF... BUT THAT DOESN'T GIVE US THE RIGHT TO INTERFERE IN THIS CONFLICT!
BOTH RACES ARE SO ALIEN... WE CAN'T EVEN COMPREHEND THE ISSUES WHICH SEPARATE THEM!

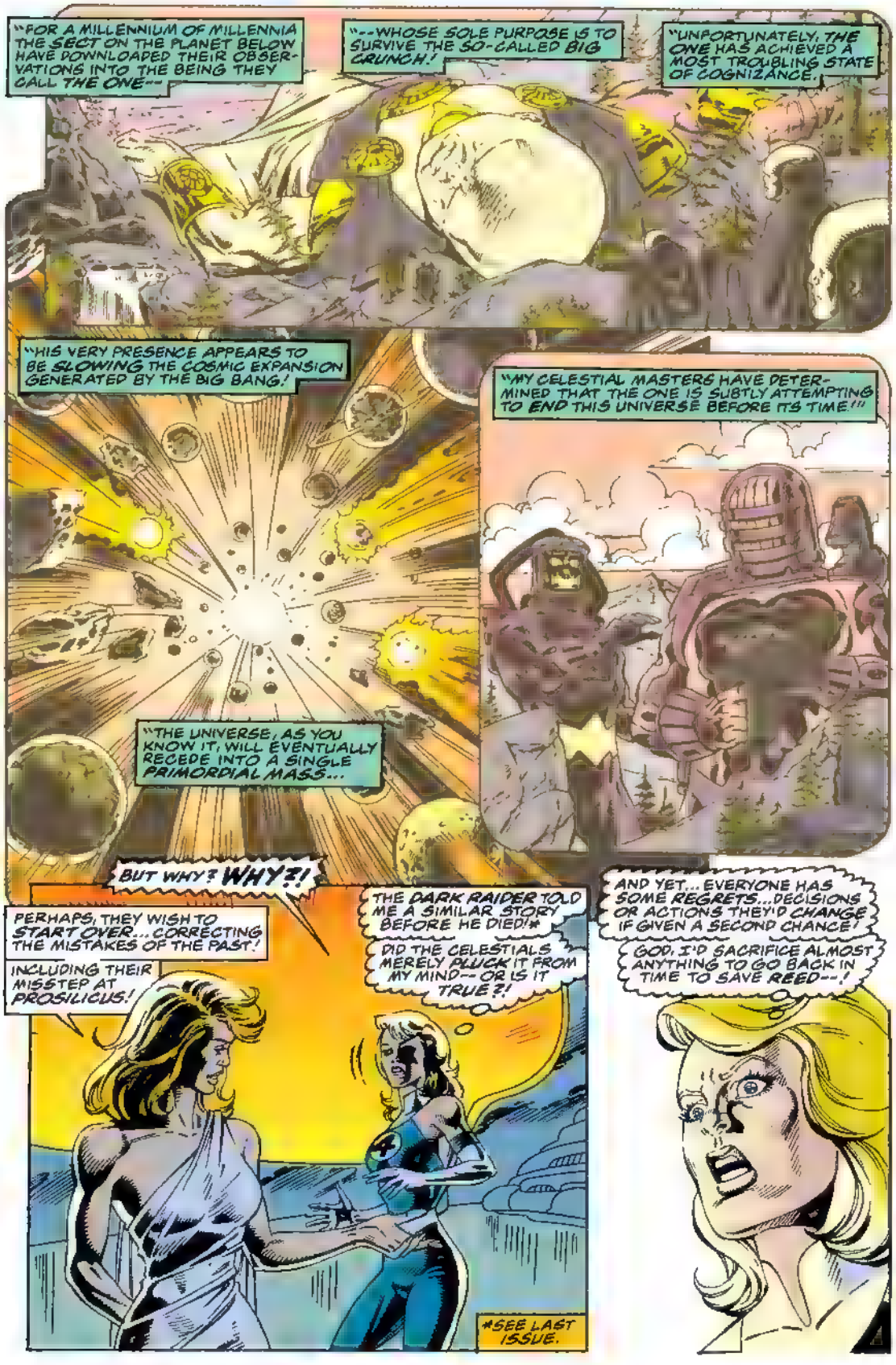

GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES, YOU OVERCONFIDENT MONSTROSITY!
BOW BEFORE NAMOR THE FIRST!
YA'LL BE NAMOR THE BRUISED WHEN I'M FINISHED!
I'VE BEEN ACHIN' TA LAY INTA YA... FOR PUTTIN' THE MOVES ON SUE... SO SOON AFTER REED DIED!
MR. FANTASTIC DEAD?!
WHEN?! HOW?!
BUT, EVEN BEFORE THE CHAGRINED THING CAN EXPLAIN--
I, WHO BLAZE THROUGH SPACE LIKE A LIVING COMET, DID NOT CHOOSE THIS AS MY DESTINATION!
IT DOES NOT POSSESS THE ENERGY UPON WHICH THE GREAT GALACTUS MUST FEED!
SWELL! AT LEAST WITH THE SILVER SURFER ON THE SCENE..
...I CAN BE REAL CONFIDENT THAT THE SITUATION CAN'T GET MUCH NASTIER!
ON THE CONTRARY, UGLY ONE...
YOUR WORDS WILL SOON BE PROVEN FALSE BY TERRAX THE TERRIBLE!
EACH NEW ADVERSARY SEEMS TO BE MORE POWERFUL THAN HIS PREDECESSOR! THUS, IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE--
FACE ME, IMPOSTOR--!

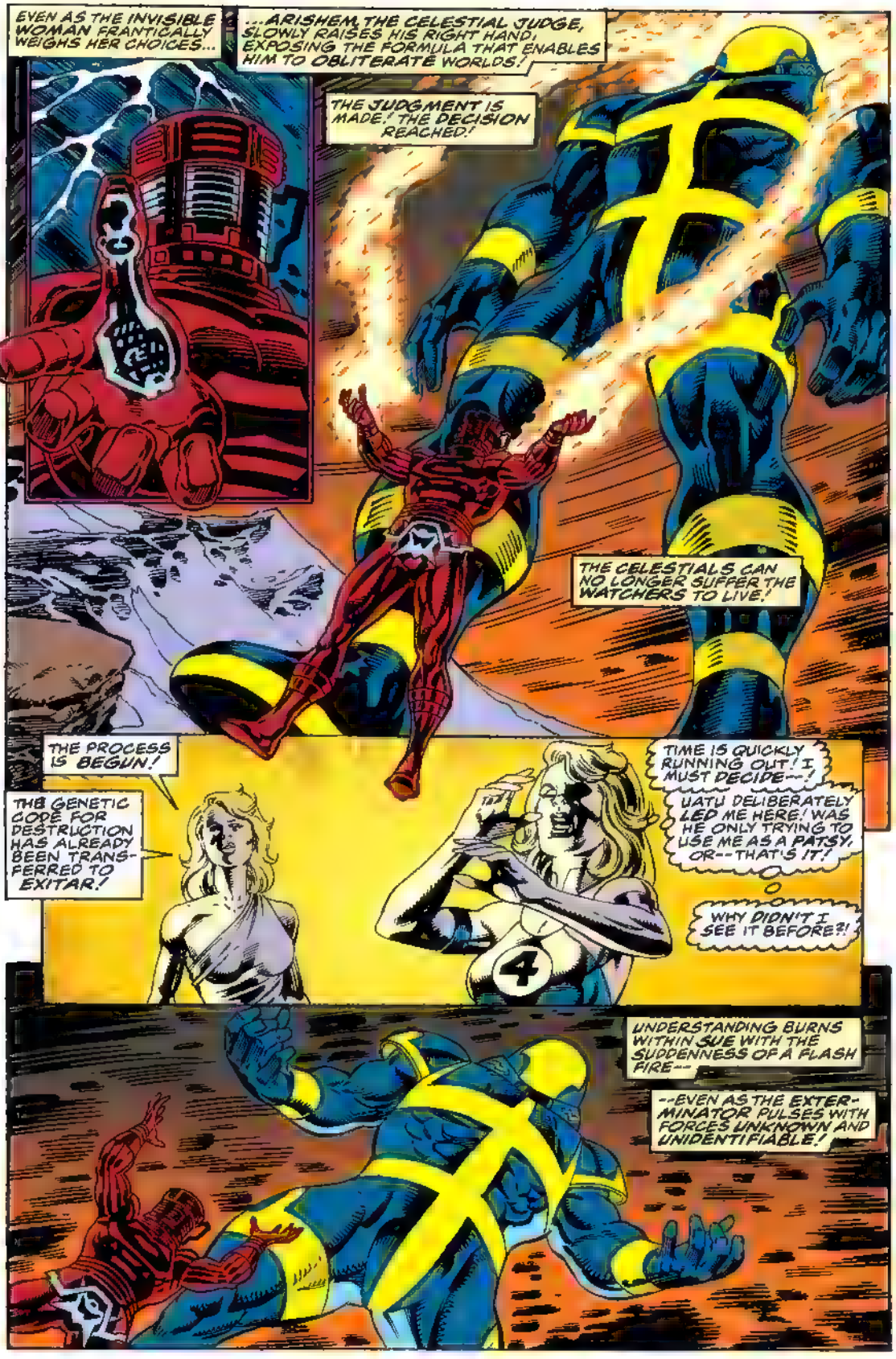
TURN... AND FACE HIM THAT YOU WOULD DISHONOR WITH SUCH A CRUDE AND PITIFUL MASQUERADE!
MASTER! IT IS I... KRISTOFF... YOUR MOST LOYAL SERVANT!
YOU ARE UNKNOWN TO ME!
BUT I RECOGNIZE YOU, DOOM... YOU WHO ONCE IMPRISONED TERRAX!
GET DOWN, KID!
BUT, THE MASTER--!
FORGET HIM! THIS ISN'T THE DOOM YOU KNOW!
HE'D BLOW YOU APART AS SOON AS LOOK AT YOU!
UNHAND ME, LANG! I SHOULD OXIDIZE YOU FOR HAVING THE UNMITIGATED GALL, THE INSUFFERABLE ARROGANCE TO BEFOUL MY IMPERIAL PERSON!
YOU'RE WELCOME, KRISTOFF! GLAD I COULD BE OF--
OH, GOD!
NO! NOOOO--!
THAT FLYING CREEP JUST DESTROYED THE ONLY HOPE WE HAD!
THIS IS MY FAULT!
THE MILKY WAY IS DOOMED BECAUSE I BLEW IT UP!
I MAY BE THE WEAKEST LINK ON THIS TEAM, BUT I REFUSE TO SURRENDER! I WON'T GIVE UP!
I KNOW THERE'S STILL GOT TO BE A WAY TO BEAT ARON! AND I'M DETERMINED TO FIND IT--
--EVEN IF IT COSTS MY LIFE!

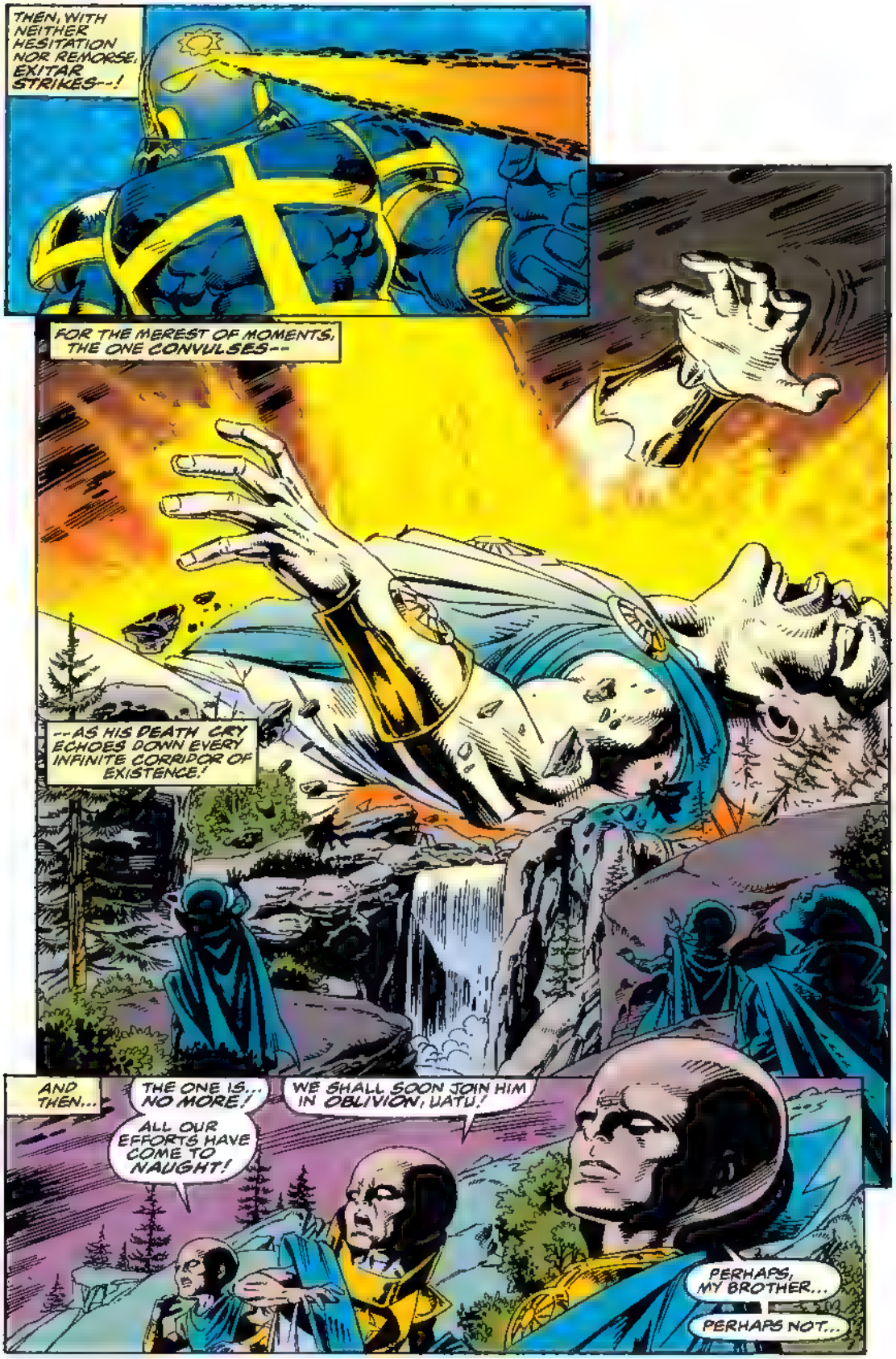

MY GOD--!
THIS IS IT! THE CREATURE'S BRAIN... OR THE BIO-MECHANICAL CORE WHICH APPARENTLY FUNCTIONS AS HIS NERVE CENTER!
SO MUCH IS UNKNOWN ABOUT THE CELESTIALS... THAT EVEN UATU WAS HAZY!
I QUESTION THE RIGHT OF ANY GROUP-- BE THEY BENEVOLENT SPACE GODS, OR RUTHLESS GENETIC PURISTS --TO DETERMINE WHICH GROUPINGS OF PEOPLE SHALL LIVE AND WHICH SHALL DIE!
K-ZAAAKKK!
ARRGHH!
AND YET, AM I NOT DOING THE SAME THING BY SIDING WITH THE WATCHERS?
HOW CAN I POSSIBLY HARM ANYTHING SO AWESOME? SO MAGNIFICENT?
IF ONLY WE COULD COMMUNICATE--!
IN THE SELF-SAME INSTANT SUSAN RICHARDS MAKES CONTACT WITH THE CELESTIAL SHELL--

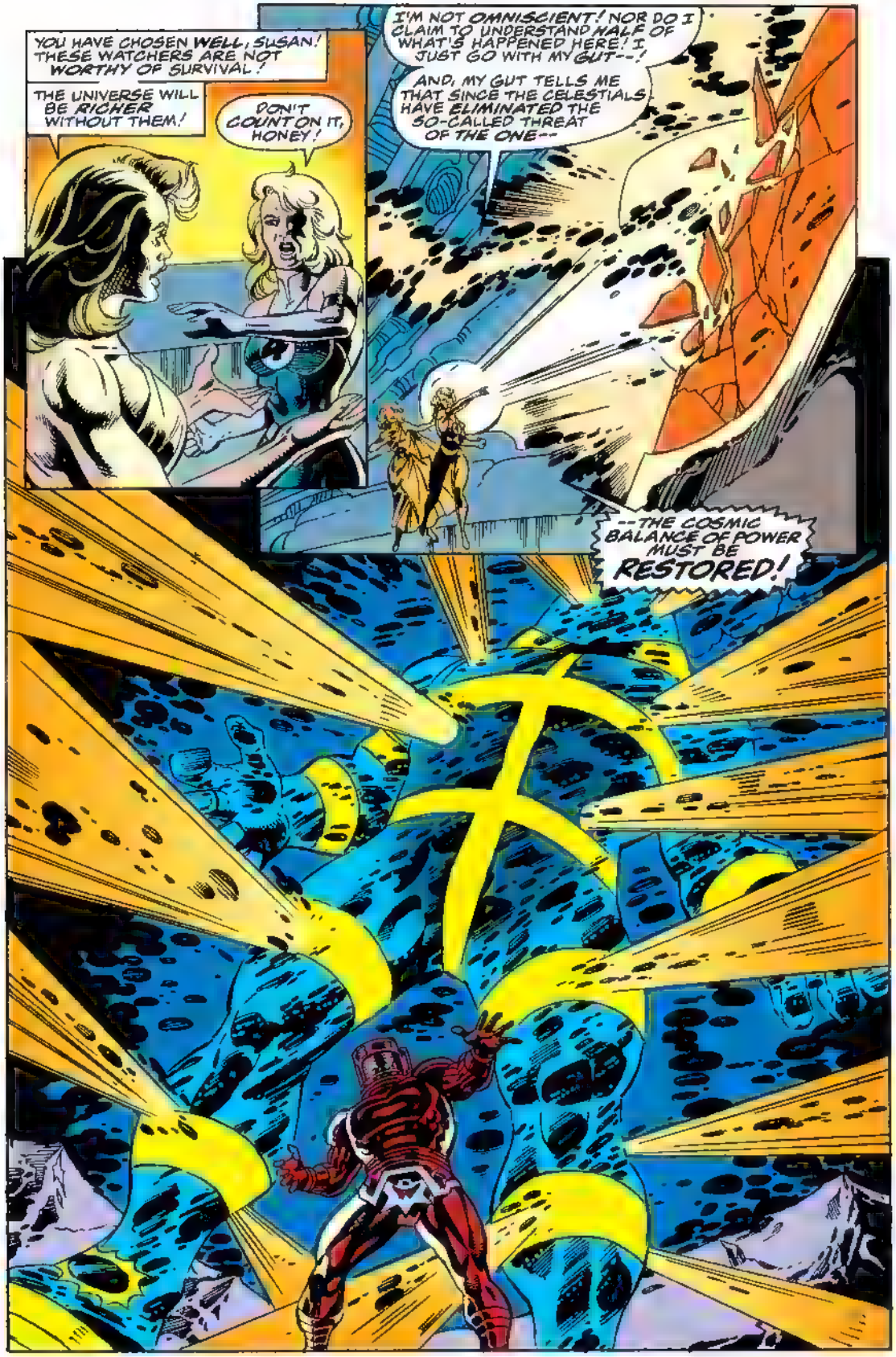

-- HER MIND ERUPTS WITH SEARING MEMORIES, AS HER ENTIRE LIFE RAPIDLY FLASHES PAST HER!
BUT, AMID THE CLUTTER OF HER WELL-LIVED YEARS, A SINGLE DAY BURNS BRIGHTER THAN ALL THE REST!
A MOST SPECIAL AND FATEFUL DAY!
A DAY FILLED WITH PAIN! FEAR! HORROR!
AND POSSIBILITIES UNDREAMT AND UNMEASURED!

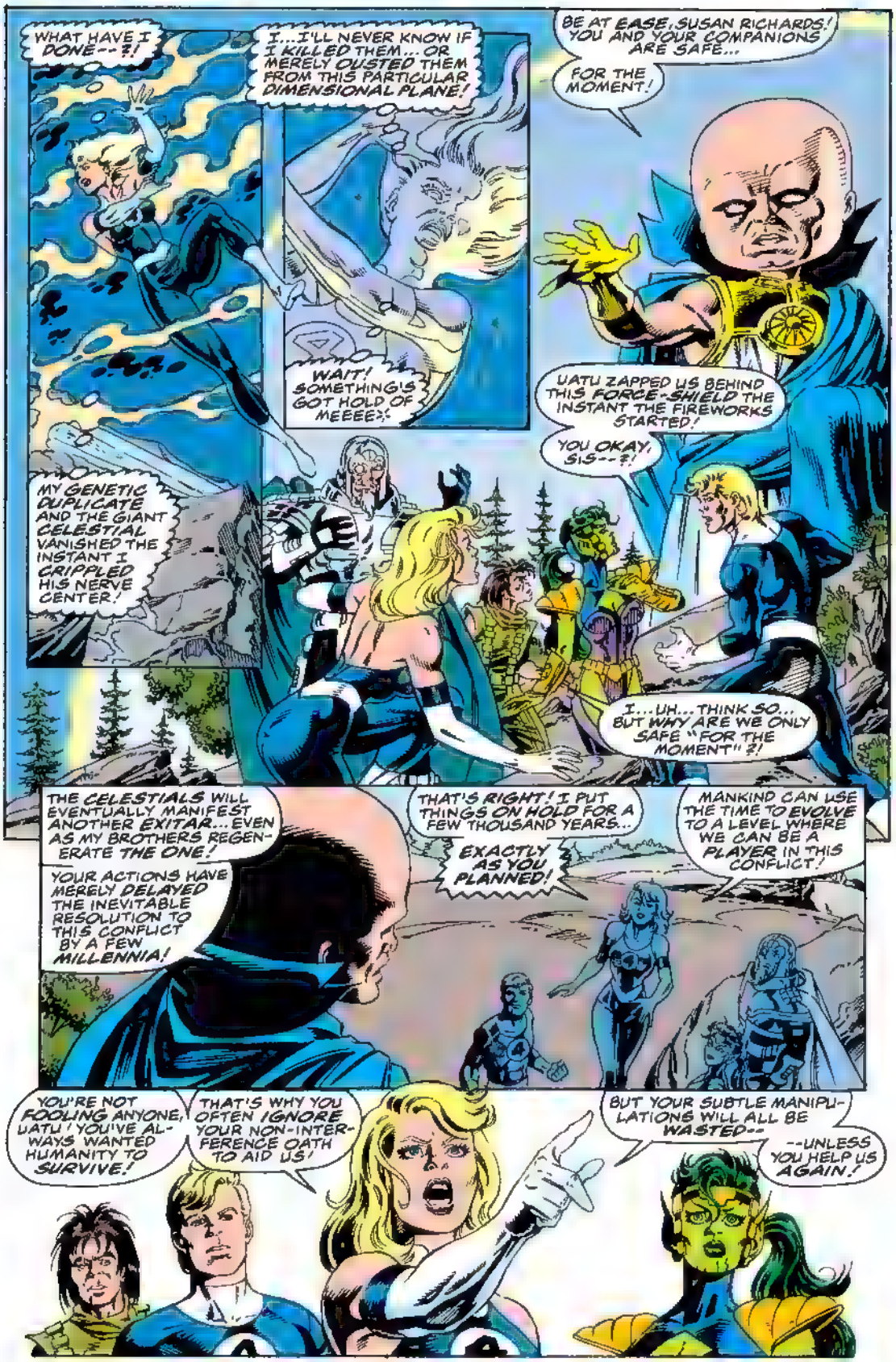
OOOOOH, MAMA!
F-FEELS LIKE THE CELESTIALS STRIPPED MY SOUL...AND PLAYED MY MIND!
A BURST OF SEARING ENERGY IS SUDDENLY STREAKING TOWARD ME!
COULD IT BE SOME SORT OF ATTACK--?!
NO...IT SEEMS TO BE COALESCING ...INTO HUMAN FORM!
YOU SHOULD BE VERY PROUD OF YOURSELF, SUSAN!
FEW DARE THIS DEADLY GAUNTLET!
FAR FEWER REACH THE SACRED SANCTUM!
SHE...SHE APPEARS TO BE A GENETIC DUPLICATE...DESIGNED TO COMMUNICATE WITH ME!
WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? WHY DO THE CELESTIALS ATTACK THE WATCHERS?
WHAT PURPOSE WILL BE SERVED BY THEIR DESTRUCTION?
THE REASONS ARE TOO COMPLEX...THE CONCEPTUAL DIVERGENCES TOO VAST...TO BE EXPRESSED WITHIN THE CONFINES OF MERE HUMAN LANGUAGE!
HOWEVER, SINCE YOU POSSESS A VIBRATIONAL HARMONY WITH MY CELESTIAL MASTERS, I WILL ATTEMPT A PARTIAL EXPLANATION...
"THE DIMENSIONAL PLANE OF THE UNIVERSE, WHICH IS PERCEIVABLE EVEN TO YOUR DULL HUMAN SENSES, WAS FORMED COUNTLESS EONS AGO--
"--BY A MINOR AFTER-SHOCK OF A MUCH GREATER CATACLYSM!
"AN AFTERSHOCK CURIOUSLY CALLED THE BIG BANG BY EARTH SCIENTISTS!
"INNUMERABLE MILLENNIA LATER, THE RACE WHICH YOU REFER TO AS THE WATCHERS UNDERTOOK THEIR MISSION OF PASSIVE OBSERVATION--
"--AFTER AN EXPERIMENT IN ALTRUISM RESULTED IN THE NUCLEAR DESTRUCTION OF THE PLANET PROSILICUS!
"AND YET, NOT ALL WATCHERS FOLLOW THE SAME AGENDA...


"FOR A MILLENNIUM OF MILLENNIA THE SECT ON THE PLANET BELOW HAVE DOWNLOADED THEIR OBSERVATIONS INTO THE BEING THEY CALL THE ONE--
"--WHOSE SOLE PURPOSE IS TO SURVIVE THE SO-CALLED BIG CRUNCH!
"UNFORTUNATELY, THE ONE HAS ACHIEVED A MOST TROUBLING STATE OF COGNIZANCE.
"HIS VERY PRESENCE APPEARS TO BE SLOWING THE COSMIC EXPANSION GENERATED BY THE BIG BANG!
"MY CELESTIAL MASTERS HAVE DETERMINED THAT THE ONE IS SUBTLY ATTEMPTING TO END THIS UNIVERSE BEFORE ITS TIME!!!
"THE UNIVERSE, AS YOU KNOW IT, WILL EVENTUALLY RECEDE INTO A SINGLE PRIMORDIAL MASS...
BUT WHY? WHY?!
PERHAPS, THEY WISH TO START OVER... CORRECTING THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST!
INCLUDING THEIR MISSTEP AT PROSILICUS!
THE DARK RAIDER TOLD ME A SIMILAR STORY BEFORE HE DIED!*
DID THE CELESTIALS MERELY PLUCK IT FROM MY MIND-- OR IS IT TRUE?!
*SEE LAST ISSUE.
AND YET... EVERYONE HAS SOME REGRETS... DECISIONS OR ACTIONS THEY'D CHANGE IF GIVEN A SECOND CHANCE!
GOD, I'D SACRIFICE ALMOST ANYTHING TO GO BACK IN TIME TO SAVE REED--!

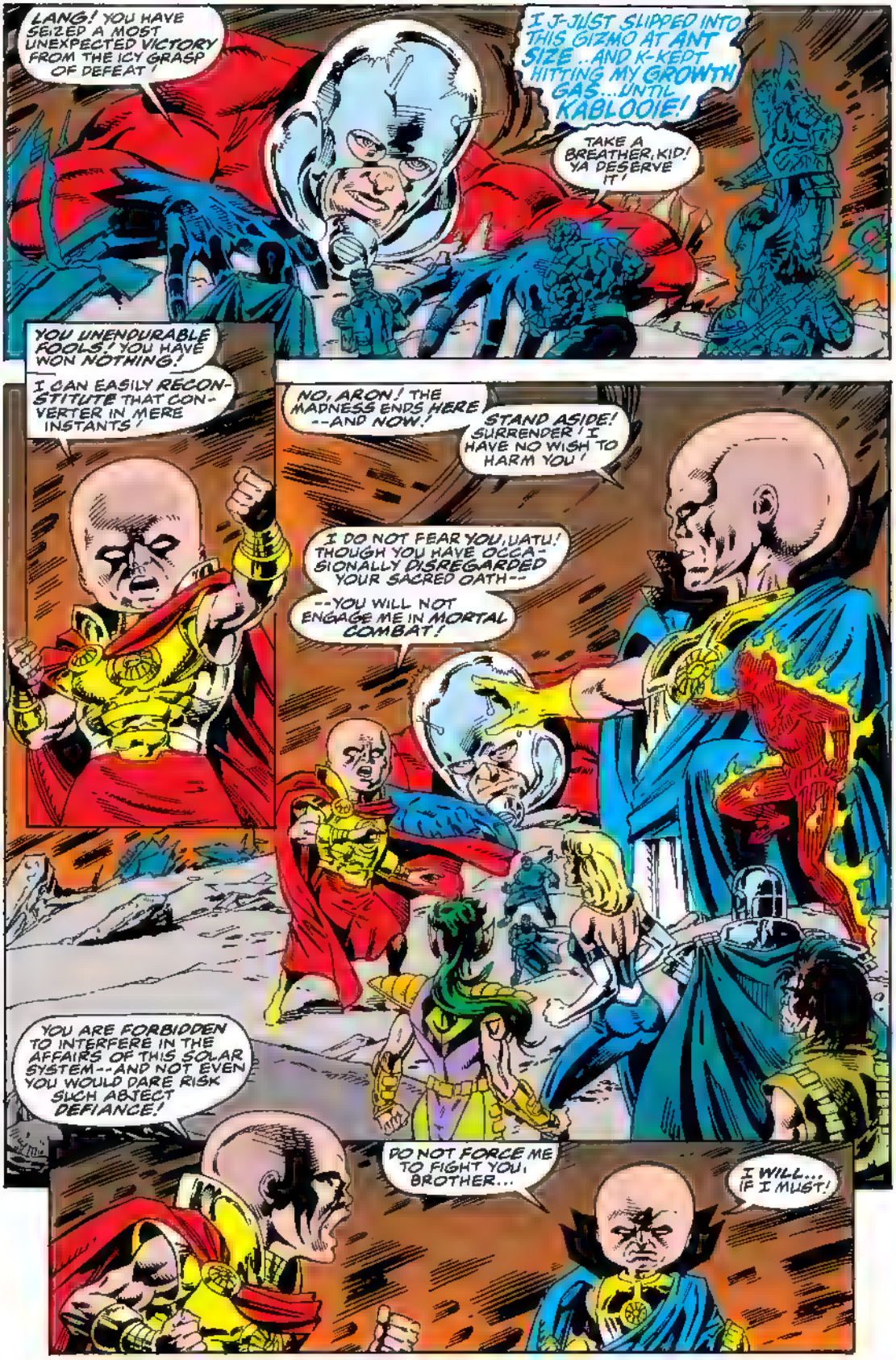

EVEN AS THE INVISIBLE WOMAN FRANTICALLY WEIGHS HER CHOICES...
...ARISHEM, THE CELESTIAL JUDGE, SLOWLY RAISES HIS RIGHT HAND, EXPOSING THE FORMULA THAT ENABLES HIM TO OBLITERATE WORLDS!
THE JUDGMENT IS MADE! THE DECISION REACHED!
THE CELESTIALS CAN NO LONGER SUFFER THE WATCHERS TO LIVE!
THE PROCESS IS BEGUN!
THE GENETIC CODE FOR DESTRUCTION HAS ALREADY BEEN TRANSFERRED TO EXITAR!
TIME IS QUICKLY RUNNING OUT! I MUST DECIDE--!
UATU DELIBERATELY LED ME HERE! WAS HE ONLY TRYING TO USE ME AS A PATSY, OR--THAT'S IT!
WHY DIDN'T I SEE IT BEFORE?!
UNDERSTANDING BURNS WITHIN SUE WITH THE SUDDENNESS OF A FLASH FIRE--
--EVEN AS THE EXTERMINATOR PULSES WITH FORCES UNKNOWN AND UNIDENTIFIABLE!

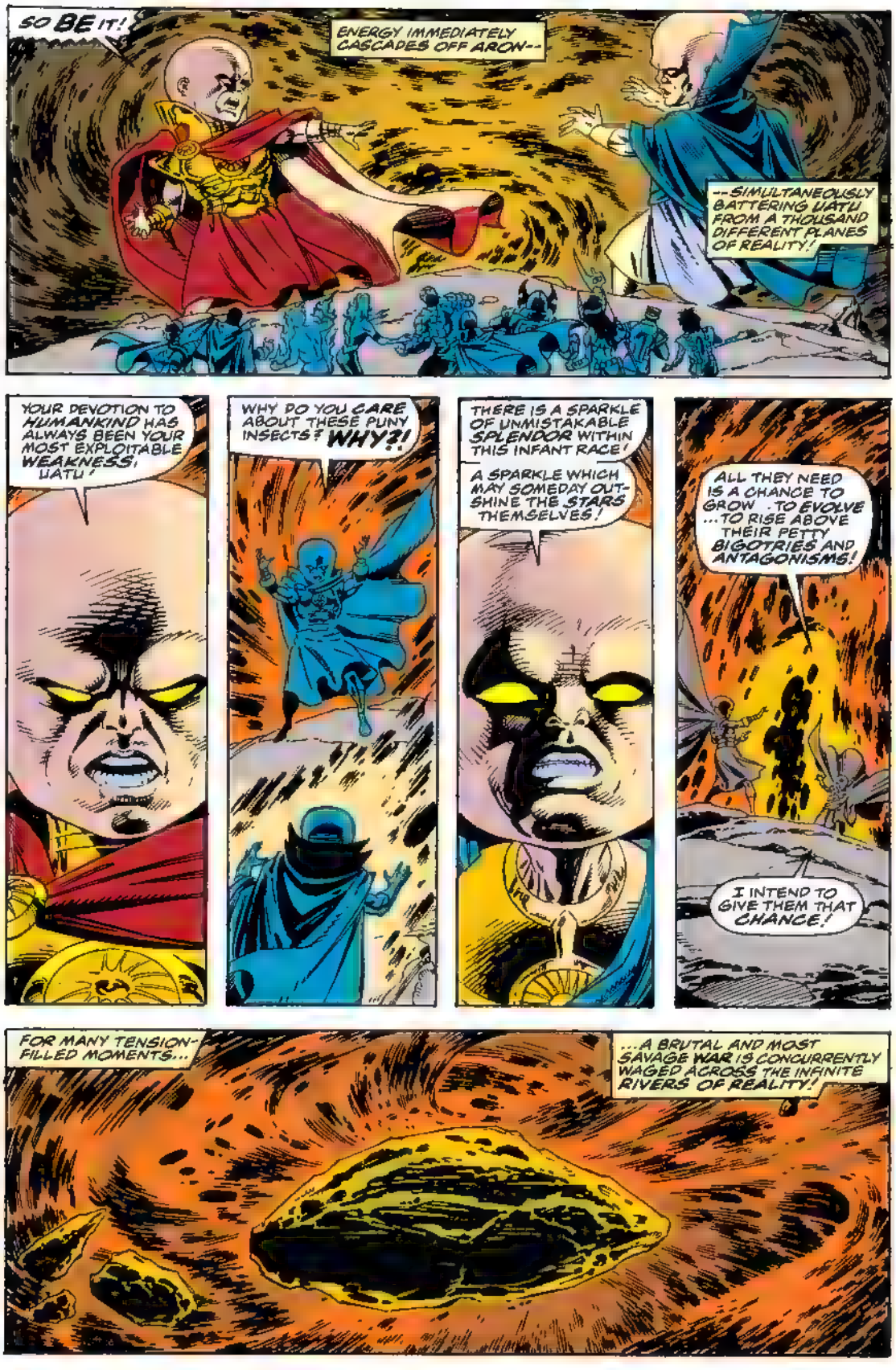

THEN, WITH NEITHER HESITATION NOR REMORSE, EXITAR STRIKES--!
FOR THE MEREST OF MOMENTS, THE ONE CONVULSES--
--AS HIS DEATH CRY ECHOES DOWN EVERY INFINITE CORRIDOR OF EXISTENCE!
AND THEN...
THE ONE IS... NO MORE!
ALL OUR EFFORTS HAVE COME TO NAUGHT!
WE SHALL SOON JOIN HIM IN OBLIVION, UATU!
PERHAPS, MY BROTHER...
PERHAPS NOT...


YOU HAVE CHOSEN WELL, SUSAN! THESE WATCHERS ARE NOT WORTHY OF SURVIVAL!
THE UNIVERSE WILL BE RICHER WITHOUT THEM!
DON'T COUNT ON IT, HONEY!
I'M NOT OMNISCIENT! NOR DO I CLAIM TO UNDERSTAND HALF OF WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE! I JUST GO WITH MY GUT--!
AND, MY GUT TELLS ME THAT SINCE THE CELESTIALS HAVE ELIMINATED THE SO-CALLED THREAT OF THE ONE--
--THE COSMIC BALANCE OF POWER MUST BE RESTORED!

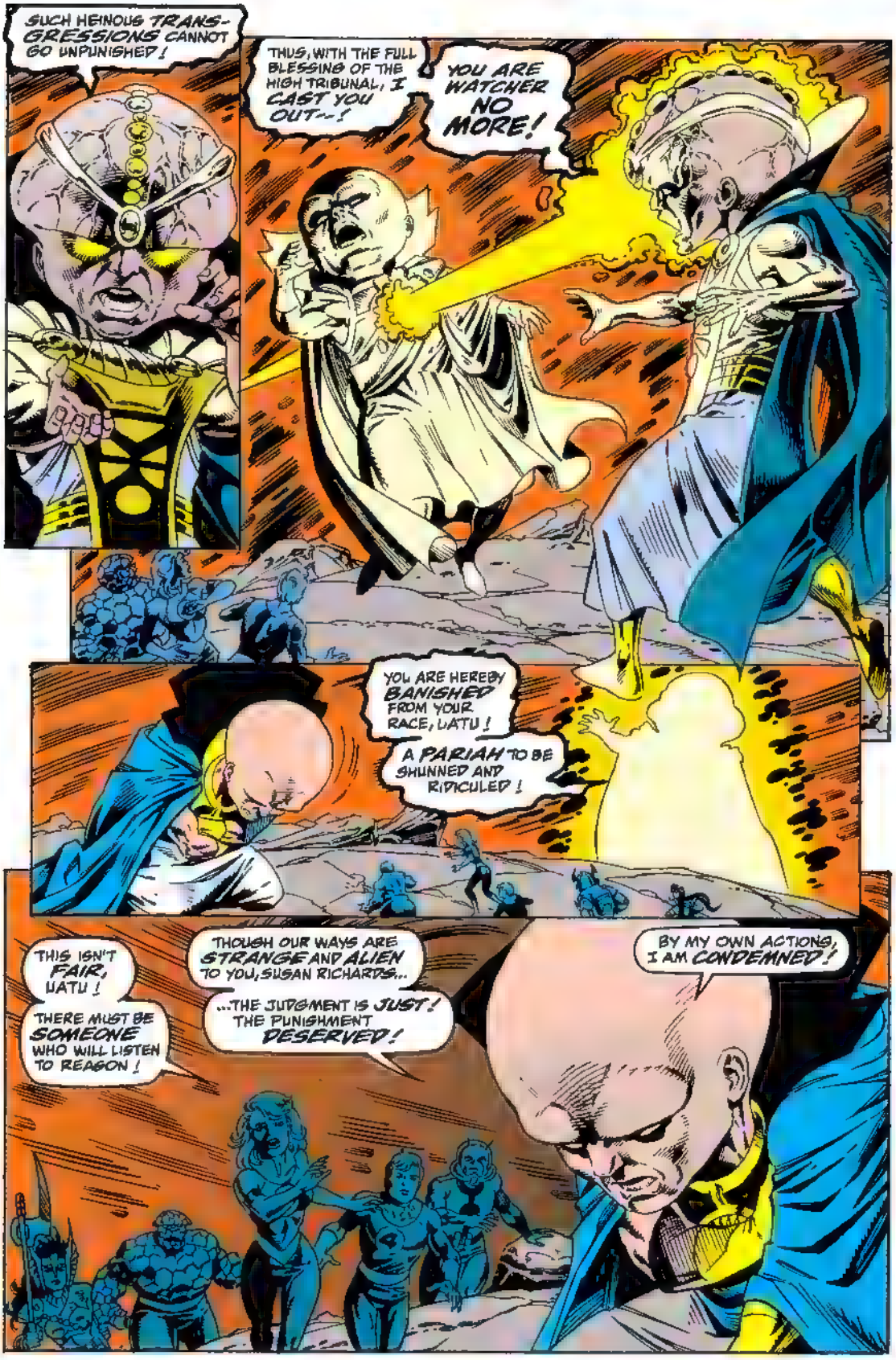

WHAT HAVE I DONE--?!
I...I'LL NEVER KNOW IF I KILLED THEM... OR MERELY OUSTED THEM FROM THIS PARTICULAR DIMENSIONAL PLANE!
WAIT! SOMETHING'S GOT HOLD OF MEEEE!
BE AT EASE, SUSAN RICHARDS! YOU AND YOUR COMPANIONS ARE SAFE...
FOR THE MOMENT!
MY GENETIC DUPLICATE AND THE GIANT CELESTIAL VANISHED THE INSTANT I CRIPPLED HIS NERVE CENTER!
UATU ZAPPED US BEHIND THIS FORCE-SHIELD THE INSTANT THE FIREWORKS STARTED!
YOU OKAY, SIS--?!
I...UH...THINK SO... BUT WHY ARE WE ONLY SAFE "FOR THE MOMENT"?!
THE CELESTIALS WILL EVENTUALLY MANIFEST ANOTHER EXITAR... EVEN AS MY BROTHERS REGENERATE THE ONE!
YOUR ACTIONS HAVE MERELY DELAYED THE INEVITABLE RESOLUTION TO THIS CONFLICT BY A FEW MILLENNIA!
THAT'S RIGHT! I PUT THINGS ON HOLD FOR A FEW THOUSAND YEARS...
EXACTLY AS YOU PLANNED!
MANKIND CAN USE THE TIME TO EVOLVE TO A LEVEL WHERE WE CAN BE A PLAYER IN THIS CONFLICT!
YOU'RE NOT FOOLING ANYONE, UATU! YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED HUMANITY TO SURVIVE!
THAT'S WHY YOU OFTEN IGNORE YOUR NON-INTERFERENCE OATH TO AID US!
BUT YOUR SUBTLE MANIPULATIONS WILL ALL BE WASTED--
--UNLESS YOU HELP US AGAIN!

HA! HA! HA!
ENJOY YOUR FINAL FIGHT, MY FRIENDS!
MY DEVICE IS NOW COMPLETED! MY TRIUMPH ASSURED!
SOON THIS INSIGNIFICANT LITTLE SOLAR SYSTEM WILL BE TRANSFORMED INTO MY OWN PRIVATE PARADISE!
ALL I NEED DO IS ACTIVATE MY UNIVERSAL CONVERTER, AND--
SOMETHING'S WRONG! MY APPARATUS HAS SUDDENLY BEGUN TO SHUDDER AND QUAKE!
Y-YES, SIR!
W-WE GOT A WHOLE LOTTA SHAKIN' GOING ON!

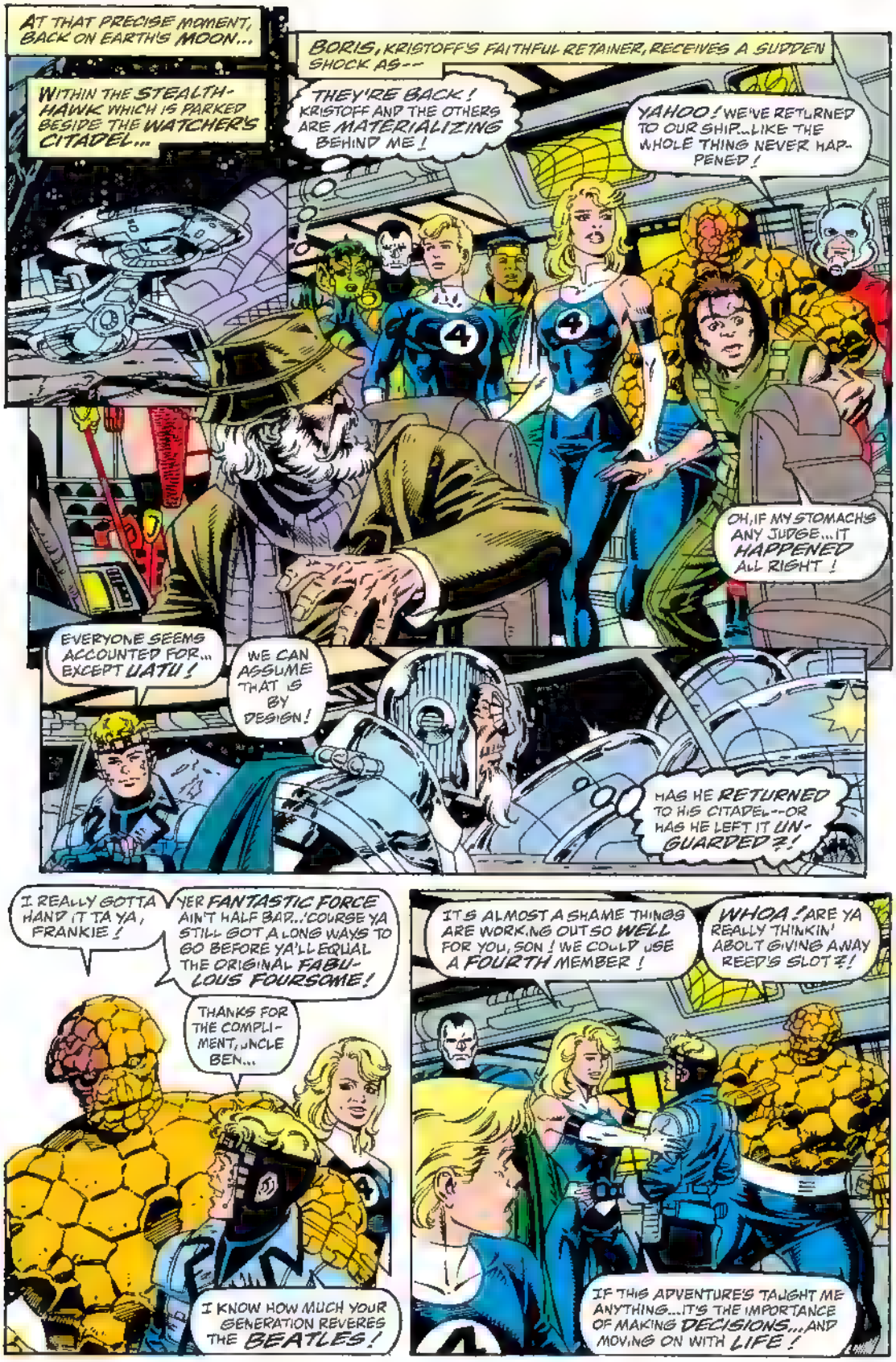

LANG! YOU HAVE SEIZED A MOST UNEXPECTED VICTORY FROM THE ICY GRASP OF DEFEAT!
I J-JUST SLIPPED INTO THIS GIZMO AT ANT SIZE..AND K-KEPT HITTING MY GROWTH GAS...UNTIL KABLOOIE!
TAKE A BREATHER, KID! YA DESERVE IT!
YOU UNENDURABLE FOOLS! YOU HAVE WON NOTHING!
I CAN EASILY RECONSTITUTE THAT CONVERTER IN MERE INSTANTS!
NO, ARON! THE MADNESS ENDS HERE --AND NOW!
STAND ASIDE! SURRENDER! I HAVE NO WISH TO HARM YOU!
I DO NOT FEAR YOU, UATU! THOUGH YOU HAVE OCCASIONALLY DISREGARDED YOUR SACRED OATH--
--YOU WILL NOT ENGAGE ME IN MORTAL COMBAT!
YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO INTERFERE IN THE AFFAIRS OF THIS SOLAR SYSTEM--AND NOT EVEN YOU WOULD DARE RISK SUCH ABJECT DEFIANCE!
DO NOT FORCE ME TO FIGHT YOU, BROTHER...
I WILL... IF I MUST!

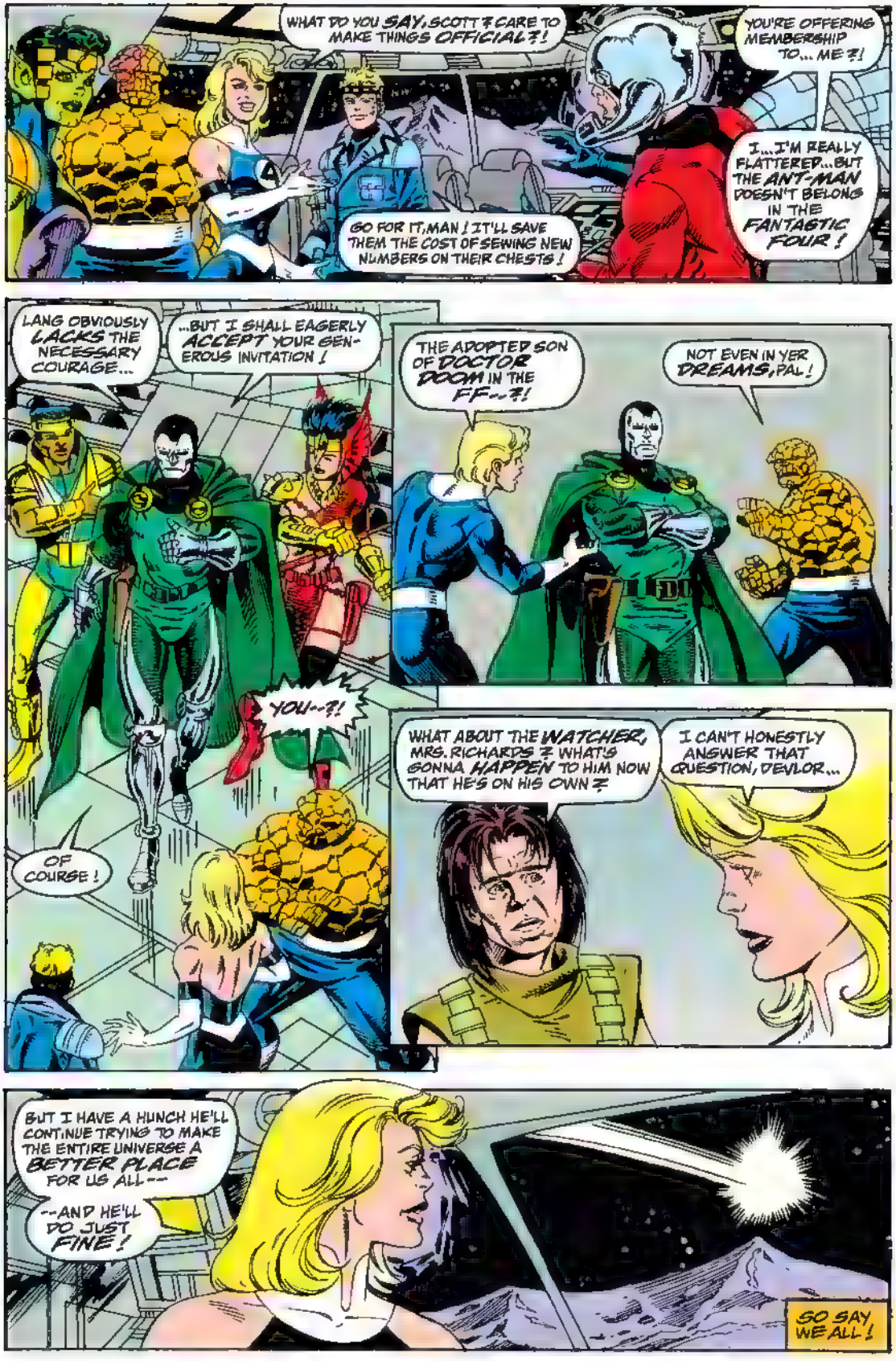

SO BE IT!
ENERGY IMMEDIATELY CASCADES OFF ARON--
--SIMULTANEOUSLY BATTERING UATU FROM A THOUSAND DIFFERENT PLANES OF REALITY!
YOUR DEVOTION TO HUMANKIND HAS ALWAYS BEEN YOUR MOST EXPLOITABLE WEAKNESS, UATU!
WHY DO YOU CARE ABOUT THESE PUNY INSECTS? WHY?!
THERE IS A SPARKLE OF UNMISTAKABLE SPLENDOR WITHIN THIS INFANT RACE!
A SPARKLE WHICH MAY SOMEDAY OUTSHINE THE STARS THEMSELVES!
ALL THEY NEED IS A CHANCE TO GROW ...TO EVOLVE ...TO RISE ABOVE THEIR PETTY BIGOTRIES AND ANTAGONISMS!
I INTEND TO GIVE THEM THAT CHANCE!
FOR MANY TENSION-FILLED MOMENTS...
...A BRUTAL AND MOST SAVAGE WAR IS CONCURRENTLY WAGED ACROSS THE INFINITE RIVERS OF REALITY!

AND THEN...
:URRRGH:
YOU CAN NO LONGER DENY THE INEVITABLE, ARON!
YOU GROW WEAKER BY THE MOMENT!
IT WOULD BE SO EASY TO DESTROY YOU NOW...TO SIMPLY ERASE YOU FROM EXISTENCE!
BUT THAT IS NOT MY WAY--!
INSTEAD, I WILL CONVERT YOU INTO PURE LIVING ENERGY!
YOU WHO HAVE ALWAYS SCORNED THE ONE... WILL NOW SERVE AS THE CORE OF HIS REGENERATION!
PERHAPS... IN THE MILLENNIA TO COME... YOUR DESPERATE HUNGER FOR LIFE WILL TEMPER HIS SUBTLE MACHINATIONS!
WOW!
NOT BAD, UATU! WE MAY HAVE SOLVED QUITE A FEW PROBLEMS FOR TODAY...
...AND TOMORROW!
UATU, SON OF IKOR! YOU ARE IN GRIEVOUS VIOLATION OF YOUR MOST SACRED OATH!
NOT ONLY HAVE YOU INTERCEDED IN THE AFFAIRS OF OTHER RACES--
I PRAY THAT YOUR WORDS PROVE TRUE, SUSAN--
--YOU HAVE TAKEN THE LIFE OF A BROTHER WATCHER!


SUCH HEINOUS TRANS-GRESSIONS CANNOT GO UNPUNISHED!
THUS, WITH THE FULL BLESSING OF THE HIGH TRIBUNAL, I CAST YOU OUT--!
YOU ARE WATCHER NO MORE!
YOU ARE HEREBY BANISHED FROM YOUR RACE, UATU!
A PARIAH TO BE SHUNNED AND RIDICULED!
THIS ISN'T FAIR, UATU!
THERE MUST BE SOMEONE WHO WILL LISTEN TO REASON!
THOUGH OUR WAYS ARE STRANGE AND ALIEN TO YOU, SUSAN RICHARDS...
...THE JUDGMENT IS JUST! THE PUNISHMENT DESERVED!
BY MY OWN ACTIONS, I AM CONDEMNED!

HEY, VIBRAXAS--! STOP KIDDING AROUND! YOU'VE GOT NO CAUSE TO SHAKE THE GROUND!
THIS IS NOT MY DOING, YOU MANGY OAF!
WHAT GIVES?!
THE ANOMALY--IT CANNOT RETAIN ITS STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY WITHOUT ARON'S SUPPORT!
GATHER TO ME, MY FRIENDS!
THOUGH I AM NO LONGER A WATCHER...
STILL DO I POSSESS THE COSMIC POWER WHICH IS MY BIRTHRIGHT!
STILL CAN I EFFORTLESSLY TRANSCEND THE BOUNDARIES OF MERE PHYSICAL SPACE!
STILL WILL I CARRY YOU HOME--!


AT THAT PRECISE MOMENT, BACK ON EARTH'S MOON...
WITHIN THE STEALTH-HAWK WHICH IS PARKED BESIDE THE WATCHER'S CITADEL...
BORIS, KRISTOFF'S FAITHFUL RETAINER, RECEIVES A SUDDEN SHOCK AS--
THEY'RE BACK! KRISTOFF AND THE OTHERS ARE MATERIALIZING BEHIND ME!
YAHOO! WE'VE RETURNED TO OUR SHIP...LIKE THE WHOLE THING NEVER HAPPENED!
OH, IF MY STOMACH'S ANY JUDGE...IT HAPPENED ALL RIGHT!
EVERYONE SEEMS ACCOUNTED FOR... EXCEPT UATU!
WE CAN ASSUME THAT IS BY DESIGN!
HAS HE RETURNED TO HIS CITADEL--OR HAS HE LEFT IT UNGUARDED?!
I REALLY GOTTA HAND IT TA YA, FRANKIE!
YER FANTASTIC FORCE AIN'T HALF BAD..! COURSE YA STILL GOT A LONG WAYS TO GO BEFORE YA'LL EQUAL THE ORIGINAL FABULOUS FOURSOME!
THANKS FOR THE COMPLIMENT, UNCLE BEN...
I KNOW HOW MUCH YOUR GENERATION REVERES THE BEATLES!
IT'S ALMOST A SHAME THINGS ARE WORKING OUT SO WELL FOR YOU, SON! WE COULD USE A FOURTH MEMBER!
WHOA! ARE YA REALLY THINKIN' ABOUT GIVING AWAY REED'S SLOT?!
IF THIS ADVENTURE'S TAUGHT ME ANYTHING...IT'S THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING DECISIONS...AND MOVING ON WITH LIFE!


WHAT DO YOU SAY, SCOTT? CARE TO MAKE THINGS OFFICIAL?!
YOU'RE OFFERING MEMBERSHIP TO... ME?!
I...I'M REALLY FLATTERED...BUT THE ANT-MAN DOESN'T BELONG IN THE FANTASTIC FOUR!
GO FOR IT, MAN! IT'LL SAVE THEM THE COST OF SEWING NEW NUMBERS ON THEIR CHESTS!
LANG OBVIOUSLY LACKS THE NECESSARY COURAGE...
...BUT I SHALL EAGERLY ACCEPT YOUR GENEROUS INVITATION!
THE ADOPTED SON OF DOCTOR DOOM IN THE FF--?!
NOT EVEN IN YER DREAMS, PAL!
YOU--?!
OF COURSE!
WHAT ABOUT THE WATCHER, MRS. RICHARDS? WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN TO HIM NOW THAT HE'S ON HIS OWN?
I CAN'T HONESTLY ANSWER THAT QUESTION, DEVLOR...
BUT I HAVE A HUNCH HE'LL CONTINUE TRYING TO MAKE THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE A BETTER PLACE FOR US ALL--
--AND HE'LL DO JUST FINE!
SO SAY WE ALL!

DEFENDING A TITLE

"The World's Greatest Comic Magazine."

The phrase that for nearly thirty-four years has floated over the logo and graced the covers of THE FANTASTIC FOUR. Our eyes have scanned over it hundreds of times. Its image has forever been embedded in our minds, stored along with the thousand other bits of comic book trivia that continually fill our ever-hungering brains. But have we ever, in all our years of comic book reading, thought to understand what is truly meant by the simple yet perplexing phrase: "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine"?

Is the essence behind this slogan mere sales propaganda? Can it be, that "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine" is simply hoopla designed to lure the unsuspecting reader into believing the product is something it truly (and sadly) isn't? Or is it by some chance, something completely different? Can it be, True Believers, that this bold phrase is exactly what it claims to be—an expression heralding the best of the best? Is it hopefully representing the ultimate potential of what comic books as a genre have to offer? Is THE FANTASTIC FOUR, in fact, the world's greatest comic magazine?

To uncover the truth of this captivating mystery, let us first begin by dissecting and analyzing the very phrase that befuddles us and makes the rather daring claim. *Comic*—the easy word. We know that it's a comic, that's for sure. *Magazine*—the tricky word. An argument could be made here, discussing the intricate details of what constitutes a magazine, but after a trip to the dictionary, we find that the term's defined as "A periodical containing a collection of articles, stories, pictures, and other features." Knowing this, it's simple to realize that most, if not all, comics are in fact magazines. Okay, no problem there. Which leaves us with the most confusing piece of the phrase: *World's Greatest.* Hmmm. "Not as easy to defend," you say. How true. And so, further study is necessary to uncover the truth.

What elements are needed to make something the world's greatest in anything, let alone a comic book? Well, there seems to exist at least *three* key factors which specifically contribute to making a comic book great: *great characters, great stories,* and *great art & writing* (which can further be simplified into the single category of *great creators*). In support of the claim the phrase makes, THE FANTASTIC FOUR (throughout its four-hundred issue, thirty-four year run) has indeed retained all three of these "great" elements and more. *Much more.*

Take the great characters, for instance. *Reed Richards, aka Mr. Fantastic*—a scientific genius with the ability to stretch his body like an elastic band. *Sue Storm, aka The Invisible Girl*—able to create force fields and render herself invisible to the naked eye. *Johnny Storm, aka The Human Torch*—a teenager with the power to "flame on", controlling the fires that surround his body. And lastly, *Benjamin Grimm, aka The Thing*—a deformed monstrosity with a heart of gold, harboring the strength to level mountains.

In the years prior to the inception of these great characters, the world of comic book fiction had never yet experienced the likes of heroes similar to the Fantastic Four. More a family than a team, Marvel's very own Fab Four soon transformed into the model from which many other super hero teams would later take shape. THE FANTASTIC FOUR, in effect, redefined the super hero team concept and set the pace for many years to come.

But the great characters didn't stop with the four primaries. Aside from possessing some of the freshest and most innovative main characters to come along in a great length of time, THE FANTASTIC FOUR also housed one of the most colorful and interesting supporting casts in comic book history. At times, the team has included among its ranks several of the most bizarre heroes in the entire Marvel Universe: the beautiful Inhuman sisters, Crystal & Medusa; Hero for Hire, Luke "Power Man" Cage; the titanic Thundra; Sharon "Ms. Marvel" Ventura; the glamorous and unforgettable She-Hulk; and currently the mysterious heir to Doom's dynasty, the arrogant and powerful Kristoff Vernard.

Other allies that have decorated the pages of the FF throughout the years include a cast that ranges from the alien to the familiar, from the demonic to the innocent. The mysterious witch of the fabled Salem's Seven, Agatha Harkness. She-Hulk's love interest and chief of the Keewazi tribe of Native Americans, Wyatt Wingfoot. Technological wizard and former thief, Scott Lang, aka Ant-Man. Johnny Storm's unlikely wife and Skrull shape-shifter, Lyja Lazerfist. Ben Grimm's blind girlfriend and daughter to the Puppet Master, Alicia Masters. And finally, the most dangerous grandfather-grandson combination since who-knows-when, Warlock and Psi-Lord — Nathaniel and Franklin Richards.

But besides adding variety and excitement to the book, THE FANTASTIC FOUR's stable of supporting characters has also nourished the FF family tree by branching out, allowing characters who first appeared in THE FANTASTIC FOUR to finally get titles of their own. The modern day Sub-Mariner (introduced in (#4), Doctor Doom (#5), Uatu the Watcher (#13), the Inhumans (#45), the Silver Surfer (#48), the Black Panther (#52), Warlock (#66), and Fantastic Force (#392) all made their first appearances in THE FANTASTIC FOUR and later spawned solo titles of their own. Add to those the number of titles that the FF's primary characters have either starred in or initiated (STRANGE TALES, MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE, THE HUMAN TORCH, THE THING, FANTASTIC FOUR UNLIMITED, and numerous limited series) and you are presented with an impressive array of thriving branches, all stemming from the single core seed that is THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

But let's not limit ourselves to just the heroes. The roster of THE FANTASTIC FOUR's great characters has also contained possibly the greatest Rogues' gallery of villains ever observed on the four-color printed page of comics. Catapulting into greatness with the Mole Man in #1, the FF's makers never lost steam in what seemed to be an endless barrage of original super-villain creations. The world devouring Galactus (first appearing in #48) Psycho-Man, manipulator of emotions (Ann. #5). Annihilus & Blastaar, the deadly duo from the Negative Zone (Ann. #6 & #62, respectively). The exotic alien races of the Skrull (#2) and Kree (#65). The mad Inhuman brother of Black Bolt, Maximus (#47). The various phases of the Frightful Four (#36 and others) The Red Ghost, Aron the Rogue Watcher; the Puppet Master; the Mad Thinker; Ronan the Accuser; Occulus; the Molecule Man; Rama-Tut; Dragon Man; the Dark Raider ... the list goes on and on.

And who could ever forget the greatest villain in the Marvel Universe — Doctor Doom? Shrouded in mystery, encased in an ashen suit of metal armor, this early Marvel creation succeeded in achieving the ultimate potential of comic book villainy and continues to perform as an archetype for many new villain formations (it's even been rumored that George Lucas designed Darth Vader after the maniacal tyrant's image).

As you can see, the list of great villains and their weighty contribution to THE FANTASTIC FOUR's great group of characters has been virtually limitless. Knowing this and other facts stated above, there lies no doubt in determining whether or not THE FANTASTIC FOUR has great characters. *It does.*

But how about the second key element of measuring a comic book's great-

ness? What about *great stories*? Does THE FANTASTIC FOUR have them? Read on, True Believer.

You may think that after the fantastic first issue, the creators might have troubled over measuring up to the overwhelming success of the debut-origin story. But much to the contrary, the subsequent stories only got better and better as time went on. The Fantastic Four's first encounters with both the Avengers and the X Men have never been forgotten (#26 and #28, respectively). Neither has the classic first clash between the Thing and the Incredible Hulk (#12). Reed and Sue's engagement announcement (#36) and the following wedding (Annual #3) have long been considered gems of stories, held close to any FF fan's heart. Likewise, the birth of Franklin (Annual #6) and the tragic stillborn death of Reed and Sue's second child (#267) have also been regarded as very special.

Add to these epic tales such monumental sagas as the introduction of the Inhumans (#'s 45-47), Reed and Sue's departure from the team (#'s 307 326), Thing's reversions back to human form (#'s 38 and #326), "Nobody Gets Out Alive" (#'s 387-392), Reed and Sue's separation (#'s 130-149), and the unforget table "Coming of Galactus" (#'s 48-50), and you have yourself one impressive run of action-packed, heart-warming, gut-wrenching stories. A run which thousands of comic book readers everywhere have often cited as the cream of the crop, the absolute best they have ever read. After touching so many people's lives—young and old, boy and girl—in so many different ways, it's hard to deny that THE FANTASTIC FOUR doesn't have great stories. *It does.*

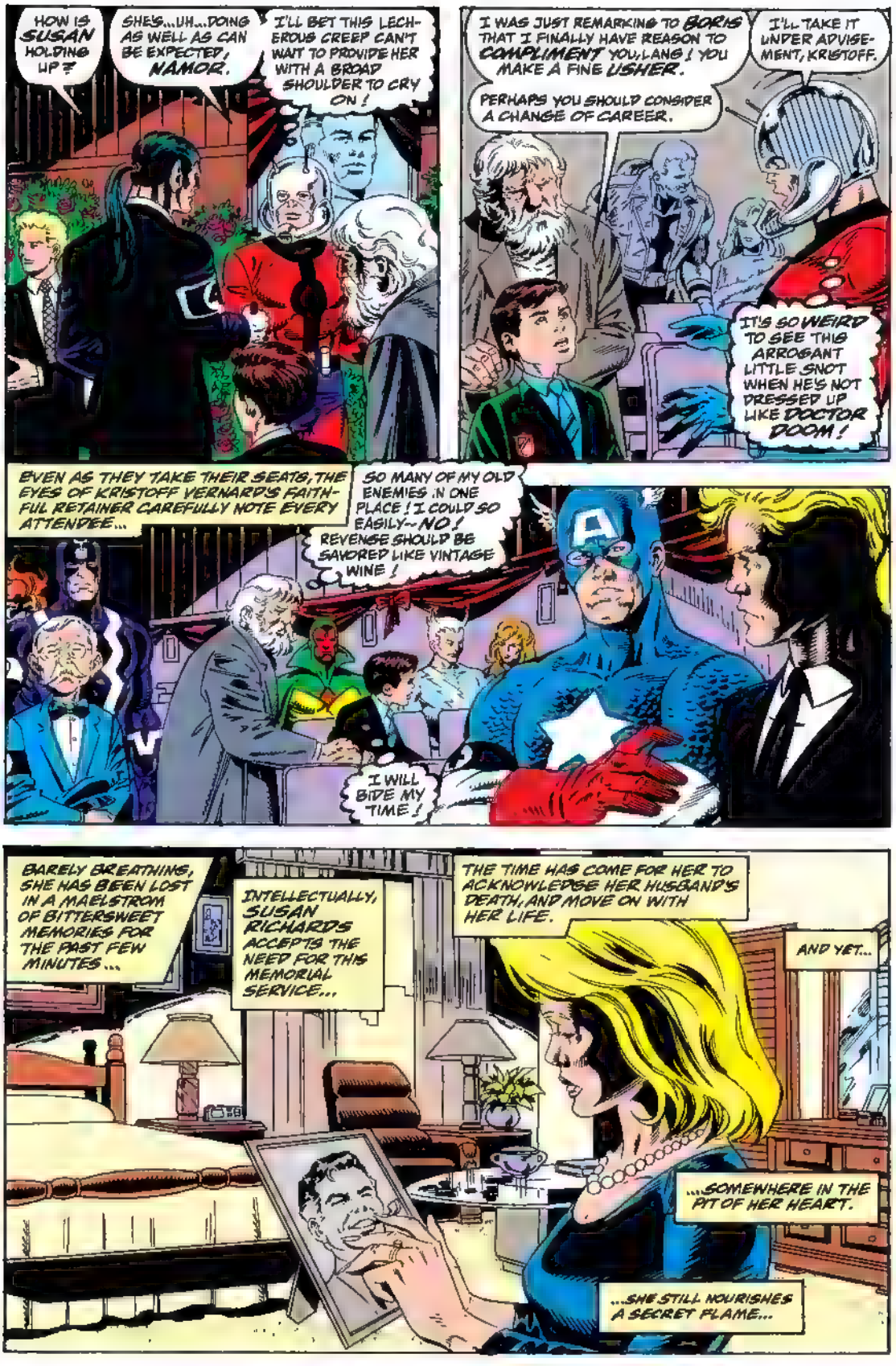
So that's two key elements down and just one to go: *great creators*—the easiest of the three "great" categories to validate. When the FF's credit box has contained a who's who of the best in the comics industry, it becomes impossible to argue that the art or writing has ever been anything less than impressive, if not outstanding. Both great creative individuals (John Byrne, the ever-present Joe Sinnott, John Buscema, Walt Simonson, John Romita, Sr.) as well as great teams (Roy Thomas/Len Wein & George Perez, Marv Wolfman & Keith Pollard, Gerry Conway & Rich Buckler, Doug Moench & Bill Sienkiewicz, and currently Tom DeFalco & Paul Ryan) have helped breathe both life and magic into the pages of THE FANTASTIC FOUR. Other noteworthy contributors to the FF have included the likes of Steve Englehart, Vinnie Colletta, Bill Mantlo, Sal Buscema, Ron Wilson, Frank Giacoia, Archie Goodwin, Ross Andru, Danny Bulanadi, and many others.

And who could ever forget the unstoppable force behind one of the most impressive runs in comic book history? Besides creating the entire mythos of the Marvel Universe almost single-handedly, Stan "The Man" Lee and Jack "The King" Kirby also set a most outstanding record in the pages of everybody's Fantastic Favorite: an uninterrupted run of 102 issues. The enchanting fictional world that these two pioneers created as a team still stands firm and thrives today, even after four hundred issues. And let's remember, it wasn't just any team that pulled off this amazing feat. It was the *Dream Team*. Both Stan Lee and the late Jack Kirby have long been regarded as two of the greatest creators in the industry in both writing and penciling, if not *the* greatest.

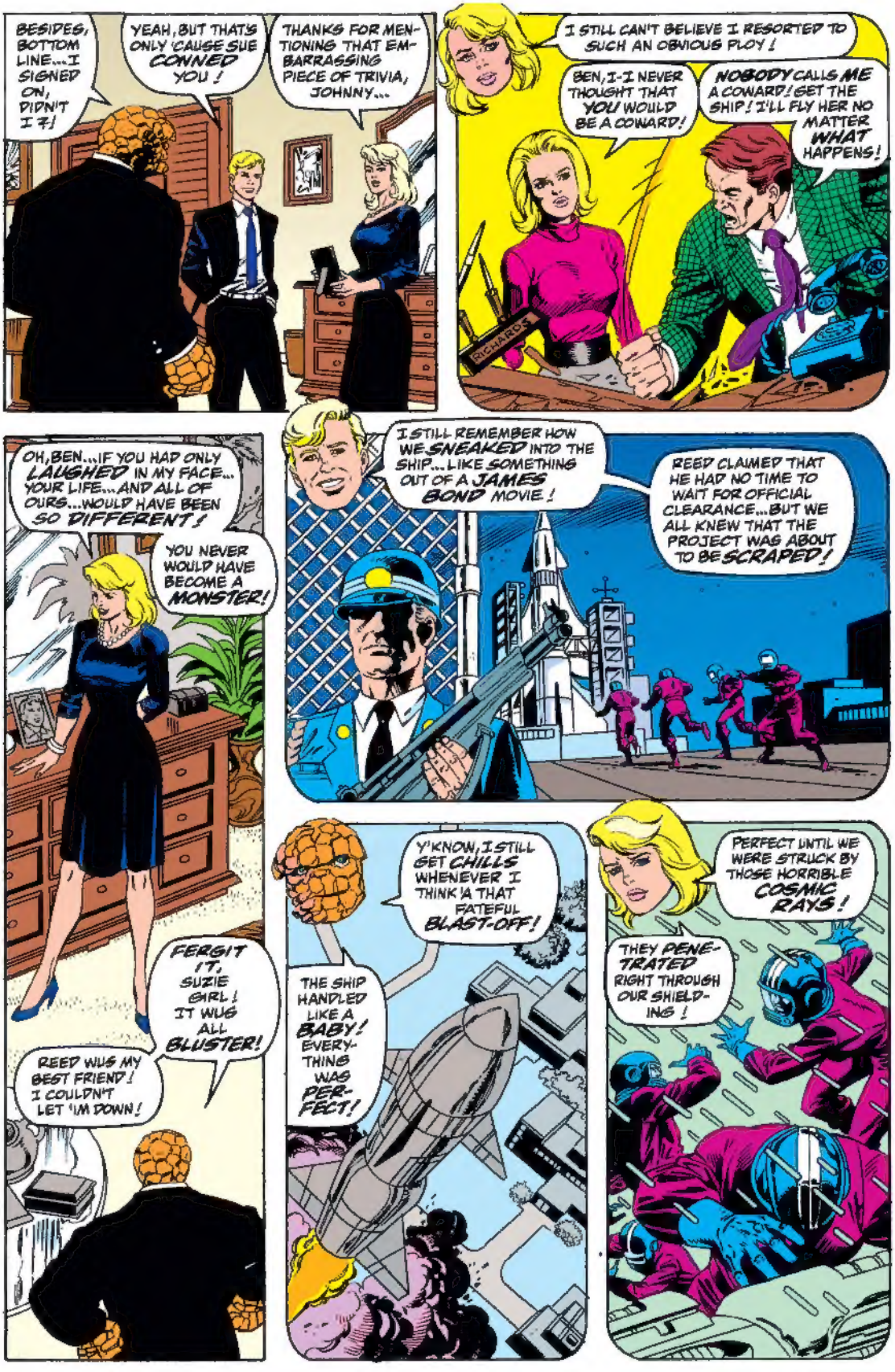
Which takes us back to that word again. Greatest. Is THE FANTASTIC FOUR actually the "World's Greatest Comic Magazine"? In the end, you can decide for yourself. But if you've done your homework and paid attention to today's class, then the evidence is sitting here plain as day in front of you.

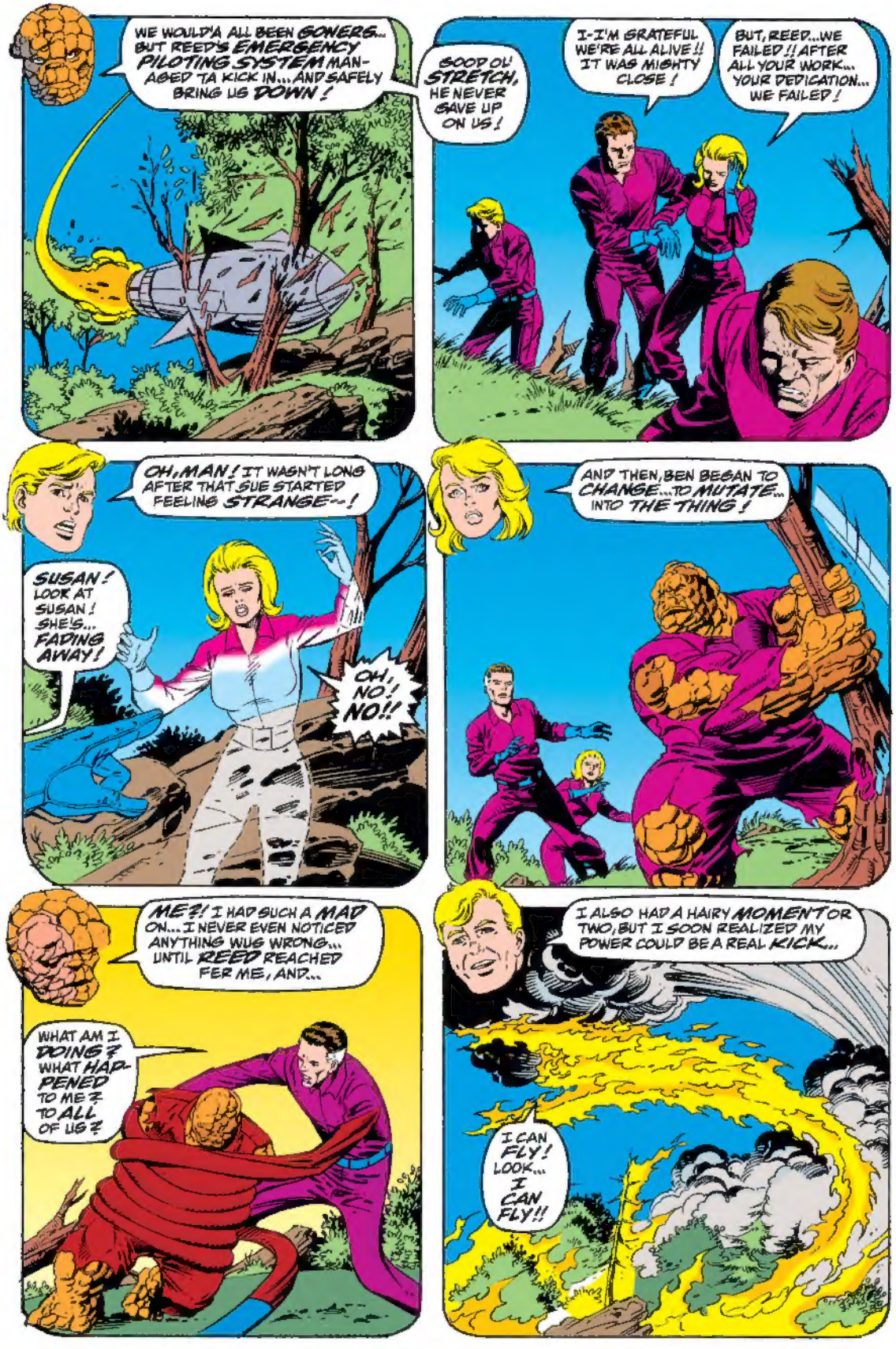
Michael Marts
February 1995
New York City

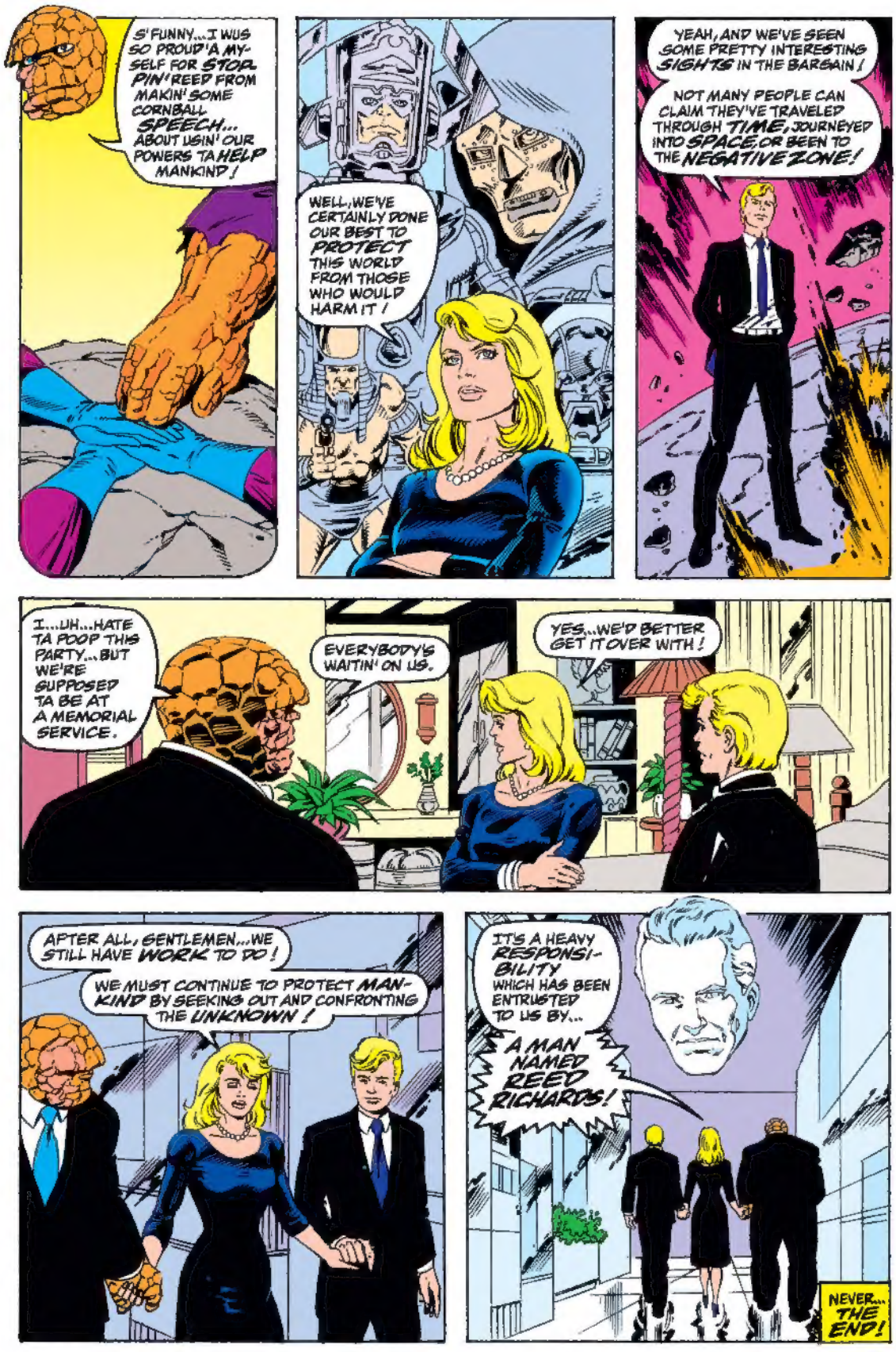
THE FABULOUS FF BID A TEARFUL FAREWELL TO THEIR FOUNDING LEADER!
IN MEMORIAM!
WITH HEADS BOWED AND VOICES HUSHED, THEY COME...
MANY TRAVELING GREAT DISTANCES, FROM THE OCEAN'S DEPTHS TO THE MOST DESOLATE REGIONS OF SILENT SPACE, TO PAY THEIR FINAL RESPECTS TO A MAN THE WORLD KNEW AS MISTER FANTASTIC!
BELOVED FATHER AND FAITHFUL HUSBAND!
LOYAL FRIEND AND DECISIVE LEADER!
BRILLIANT SCIENTIST AND NOBLE HERO!
REED RICHARDS WAS ALL OF THESE... AND MORE!
STAN LEE
JACK KIRBY
INSPIRATION
TOM DEFALCO
PAUL RYAN
STORY AND ART
DAN BULANADI
INKS
BRAD JOYCE
LETTERER
SCOTT MARSHALL
COLORIST
NEL YOMTOV
EDITOR
MARK GRUENWALD
PALLBEARER


HOW IS SUSAN HOLDING UP?
SHE'S...UH...DOING AS WELL AS CAN BE EXPECTED, NAMOR.
I'LL BET THIS LECHEROUS CREEP CAN'T WAIT TO PROVIDE HER WITH A BROAD SHOULDER TO CRY ON!
I WAS JUST REMARKING TO BORIS THAT I FINALLY HAVE REASON TO COMPLIMENT YOU, LANG! YOU MAKE A FINE USHER.
I'LL TAKE IT UNDER ADVISEMENT, KRISTOFF.
PERHAPS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER A CHANGE OF CAREER.
IT'S SO WEIRD TO SEE THIS ARROGANT LITTLE SNOT WHEN HE'S NOT DRESSED UP LIKE DOCTOR DOOM!
EVEN AS THEY TAKE THEIR SEATS, THE EYES OF KRISTOFF VERNARD'S FAITHFUL RETAINER CAREFULLY NOTE EVERY ATTENDEE...
SO MANY OF MY OLD ENEMIES IN ONE PLACE! I COULD SO EASILY--NO! REVENGE SHOULD BE SAVORED LIKE VINTAGE WINE!
I WILL BIDE MY TIME!
BARELY BREATHING, SHE HAS BEEN LOST IN A MAELSTROM OF BITTERSWEET MEMORIES FOR THE PAST FEW MINUTES...
INTELLECTUALLY, SUSAN RICHARDS ACCEPTS THE NEED FOR THIS MEMORIAL SERVICE...
THE TIME HAS COME FOR HER TO ACKNOWLEDGE HER HUSBAND'S DEATH, AND MOVE ON WITH HER LIFE.
AND YET...
...SOMEWHERE IN THE PIT OF HER HEART.
...SHE STILL NOURISHES A SECRET FLAME...

HOW YA DOING, SIG?
IT'S ALMOST TIME!
I...UH...I'LL BE READY IN A MINUTE!
YOU KNOW, IT'S REALLY OKAY FOR YOU TO MISS HIM.
WE ALL DO!
HE WAS A PRETTY GREAT GUY.
Y-YES... HE CERTAINLY WAS!
HECK, I STILL REMEMBER THE DAY HE TOLD US HE PLANNED TO TAKE US ALL ON A L'IL ROCKET RIDE!
THE UNIVERSE CAN BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN ANYONE SUSPECTS!
FOR THE SECURITY OF THE EARTH...FOR THE SAFETY OF MANKIND... WE MUST MASTER THE ABILITY TO TRAVEL THROUGH SPACE!
IF YA WANNA FLY TO THE STARS, THEN YOU PILOT THE SHIP!
COUNT ME OUT!
YA KNOW WE AIN'T DONE ENOUGH RESEARCH INTO THE EFFECT OF COSMIC RAYS!
OKAY, OKAY, SO MAYBE I WUSN'T ALWAYS THE SWEET'N CHARMIN' IDOL 'A MILLIONS THAT YA PRESENTLY SEE BEFORE YA...
EVERYBODY'S ENTITLED TO A BAD DAY!
BUT YOURS HAS LASTED FOR TOO LONG!
NOBODY ASKED YA, SQUIRT!


BESIDES, BOTTOM LINE...I SIGNED ON, DIDN'T I?!
YEAH, BUT THAT'S ONLY 'CAUSE SUE CONNED YOU!
THANKS FOR MENTIONING THAT EMBARRASSING PIECE OF TRIVIA, JOHNNY...
I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE I RESORTED TO SUCH AN OBVIOUS PLOY!
BEN, I-I NEVER THOUGHT THAT YOU WOULD BE A COWARD!
NOBODY CALLS ME A COWARD! GET THE SHIP! I'LL FLY HER NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS!
RICHARDS
OH, BEN...IF YOU HAD ONLY LAUGHED IN MY FACE... YOUR LIFE...AND ALL OF OURS...WOULD HAVE BEEN SO DIFFERENT!
YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE BECOME A MONSTER!
FERGIT IT, SUZIE GIRL! IT WUZ ALL BLUSTER!
REED WUS MY BEST FRIEND! I COULDN'T LET 'IM DOWN!
I STILL REMEMBER HOW WE SNEAKED INTO THE SHIP...LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A JAMES BOND MOVIE!
REED CLAIMED THAT HE HAD NO TIME TO WAIT FOR OFFICIAL CLEARANCE...BUT WE ALL KNEW THAT THE PROJECT WAS ABOUT TO BE SCRAPED!
Y'KNOW, I STILL GET CHILLS WHENEVER I THINK'A THAT FATEFUL BLAST-OFF!
THE SHIP HANDLED LIKE A BABY! EVERYTHING WAS PERFECT!
PERFECT UNTIL WE WERE STRUCK BY THOSE HORRIBLE COSMIC RAYS!
THEY PENETRATED RIGHT THROUGH OUR SHIELDING!


WE WOULD'A ALL BEEN GONERS... BUT REED'S EMERGENCY PILOTING SYSTEM MAN-AGED TA KICK IN... AND SAFELY BRING US DOWN!
GOOD OL' STRETCH, HE NEVER GAVE UP ON US!
I-I'M GRATEFUL WE'RE ALL ALIVE!! IT WAS MIGHTY CLOSE!
BUT, REED...WE FAILED!! AFTER ALL YOUR WORK... YOUR DEDICATION... WE FAILED!
OH, MAN! IT WASN'T LONG AFTER THAT SUE STARTED FEELING STRANGE--!
SUSAN! LOOK AT SUSAN! SHE'S... FADING AWAY!
OH, NO! NO!!
AND THEN, BEN BEGAN TO CHANGE...TO MUTATE... INTO THE THING!
ME?! I HAD SUCH A MAD ON... I NEVER EVEN NOTICED ANYTHING WUS WRONG... UNTIL REED REACHED FER ME, AND...
WHAT AM I DOING? WHAT HAP-PENED TO ME? TO ALL OF US?
I ALSO HAD A HAIRY MOMENT OR TWO, BUT I SOON REALIZED MY POWER COULD BE A REAL KICK...
I CAN FLY! LOOK... I CAN FLY!!


S'FUNNY...I WUS SO PROUD'A MYSELF FOR STOPPIN' REED FROM MAKIN' SOME CORNBALL SPEECH... ABOUT USIN' OUR POWERS TA HELP MANKIND!
WELL, WE'VE CERTAINLY DONE OUR BEST TO PROTECT THIS WORLD FROM THOSE WHO WOULD HARM IT!
YEAH, AND WE'VE SEEN SOME PRETTY INTERESTING SIGHTS IN THE BARGAIN!
NOT MANY PEOPLE CAN CLAIM THEY'VE TRAVELED THROUGH TIME, JOURNEYED INTO SPACE, OR BEEN TO THE NEGATIVE ZONE!
I...UH...HATE TA POOP THIS PARTY...BUT WE'RE SUPPOSED TA BE AT A MEMORIAL SERVICE.
EVERYBODY'S WAITIN' ON US.
YES...WE'D BETTER GET IT OVER WITH!
AFTER ALL, GENTLEMEN...WE STILL HAVE WORK TO DO!
WE MUST CONTINUE TO PROTECT MANKIND BY SEEKING OUT AND CONFRONTING THE UNKNOWN!
IT'S A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY WHICH HAS BEEN ENTRUSTED TO US BY...
A MAN NAMED REED RICHARDS!
NEVER... THE END!